

# A Tale of Seven Kisses

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Summary: Upon losing a stupid bet Astrid has to kiss Hiccup every day for a whole miserable week, but Alvin and some other villains soon mess things up, big time. It gets even more complicated when it turns out that they're after Astrid who happens to be the key to all the ancient dragon secrets - she just doesn't know about it yet.

## 1. The Bet and the Blade

**\*\*FYI: Sadly, I don't own neither Hiccup nor Astrid, I just really fancy them.\*\***

**\*\*"Such is my love, to thee I so belong,\*\***  
**><strong>That for thy right myself will bear all wrong."<strong>**

**><strong>W.S./\*\***

Berk was one tough place to live; year after year it snowed for the first 9 months then hailed for the other three. Normally, the only real heat its inhabitants got was from the dragons, who once had been their worst enemies but were their greatest allies now.

A lot has changed since an unlikely hero emerged from these rigid lands and brought peace between two species, but the weather hasn't. However, from time to time the Gods showed some unexpected leniency and warmed the frozen island up. Don't expect anything big, though, the temperature never reached 90 degrees, but the cold bearing and fur wearing Vikings felt dizzy when it was close to 70 and hid in the shade of their cool basements when it was over 80.

But there was this one young Viking, the first among equals, who unlikely his fellow tribe members, was quite fond of the rare summer days that indulged his inhospitable home isle.

He took advantage of the relative calmness and romped through the

island with his dragon companion, who was more of a trustworthy friend than a simple pet.

When the Sun was up high, he often took the liberty to have a good swim in his favorite emerald-colored lake, a real hidden gem at the very heart of their bleak island; it even had an islet in the middle, making it more unique.

The lake with the little piece of land in the heart of it were very dear to him. One summer, when his peers were even crueler to him than usual, he got tired of being ridiculed and used as a punch bag on a daily basis, so he decided to move to the little haven among the cool waves.

After the exhausting job of dragging a canoe all the way up there from the village and then rowing to the shore, he built a hut for himself. From an early age he had an uncanny ability to figure out and create things and although the little shelter was nothing fancy, it didn't collapse and it protected him against the bitter hails.

But his pleasant solitude ended when his father discovered his secret hideout and ordered him to return home to stay among the people, who disdained him, no matter how desperately he objected.

6 years had passed since that terrible summer and even though no one actually laughed at him or mocked him anymore, the silhouette of the shabby shelter made his heart warm and full of memories - it was the living memento of his once very lonely and miserable life.

But he didn't mind having a private little spot to remember where he had come from and where he was headed. Who'd have thought that the once disastrous and repelling child of the mighty chieftain becomes the dexterous and attractive aspiring leader of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe? He for one didn't.

Even though it was clearly thank to the mutual effort, he humbly believed that it all came down to the mere existence of one lovable creature who was now hiding under the shadow of a large hazelnut bush not far from him, panting with his long tongue out like a dog after chasing squirrels.

He looked at his reptile mate, who was clearly suffering from the unusual heat, with proud, tender eyes, but the dragon's overacting drew a huge smirk on his face. Toothless, you pouting, big baby booâ€|

He decided to unfold his rough cotton blanket on the sandy shore to spend the next hour or so with lazy sun bathing. After all, they spent all morning in the air, practicing the craziest skills a dragon and his rider can achieve, so the little midday break was nothing but well-deserved.

Not fifteen minutes later, when he was just about to drift away to the distant infinity of untamed dreams, a shadow towered over him, blocking the gentle caress of the Sun.

He lifted a hand to his brow to shade his eyes. His sight was a bit blurry for a second or two but he immediately recognized the slender and apparently a bit annoyed, yet stunningly beautiful blonde, who

was standing right in front of him. She crossed her arms at her chest, giving a little lift to some forbidden parts that instantly magnetized the boy's groggy eyes.

Oh, Astrid Hofferson, the biggest, the wildest and most exquisite enigma of his life. He could easily understand any dragon, he could predict their moves and tame even the fiercest ones, but Astrid Hofferson was no piece of cake.

First of all, she wasn't sweet at all, but her very unladylike rough ways just made her even more desirable for the young Viking men, and Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III was no exception. Second of all, she had the brains, which made her a rare treasure among the undisciplined muttonheads also known as the average Berkian teenagers.

And thirdly... well, she was looking damn good. As long as he could remember, Hiccup always fancied her, but again, what's not to like in a girl who had an ocean of honey-colored hair and eyes that made the clearest, bluest sky hide away in shame?

However, it happened only very recently that he noticed how her once slim, girlish features started to turn into something more exciting, mature and womanly. Her long and lean body developed curves at all the right places, which not only changed her appearance but her movements too. Intoxicating parts of her were now swinging and swaying all the time, making it a bit difficult to concentrate on whatever she was saying.

Shame or no shame, occasionally, mostly when he was just about to fall asleep, the image of her flawless figure crept into Hiccup's mind, making him feel terrific for the night and a little bit terrified when he next bumped into her. Luckily, there were no telltale marks on him and his sub rosa admiration remained his well-kept secret.

But their relationship was changing, all the time.

When they were kids, she never really paid attention to him, which was actually a great thing, because those who did, did it on the hard way - he was the flimsy victim of cruel pranks and beat-ups and constant mockery. But she was too good to be bad to the weaker and without saying a word, she despised those who weren't.

Still, he was invisible to her and sometimes it hurt more than a good old punch to the stomach.

Then she was forced to notice him when he joined dragon training much against his will - and everybody else's for that matter. But as it turned out and unlikely as it may have sounded, he was actually really good at it, or so it seemed, when he showed a curious talent at disciplining and controlling the rabid reptiles.

Astrid couldn't believe her own eyes and ears and later his lips, when he tried to cover his dark and scaly secret with the clumsiest little fibs. She was flabbergasted when she learned what he was hiding and she was astonished when she figured out what he had in him.

And then everything happened so fast. The known world turned upside

down and the little weakling finally lived up to his middle name and defeated the most gigantic foe they had ever laid eyes on, never thinking twice about risking his life for a father who denied him and for the people who were nothing but unkind to him.

She will never forget standing there, completely broken, looking at his fragile, scorched body wishing for the tiniest sign of life in him.

Not long before his almost fatal heroic deed, she started to show affection towards him, which in her case meant the well-balanced mixture of violence and kindness. It was a dream come true for Hiccup, but he never had the guts to take action, he couldn't stop thinking that she was way out of his league. Plus their peers started to make fun of their alleged relationship, the result of which was Astrid basically shying away from him.

There were no more pecks, just punches, but their friendship remained as strong as a Gronkle's jaw.

And here she was now, standing right in front of him, in all her beauty, with her feet tapping in the sand, looking agitated, which often happened these days he just didn't have the courage to ask her why...

She was wearing a pair of loose canvas shorts and breast bindings, which indicated that she, too, came down for the cool waves.

"Having the time of your life?" She inquired, not even trying to hide her disappointment upon finding the beach occupied when she desperately needed some alone time.

"Hi... Astrid," he said to her sheepishly while standing up and what was meant to be a decent greeting came out of his mouth as an awkward mumble. Her recent mood swings made him feel a bit insecure and although he was 99 percent sure that he wasn't causing them, he wasn't brave enough to ask for the reason behind all that crankiness.

"Happy to see you - as always," he added with a casual grin when he was up; being now a head taller than she was the best confidence booster ever. Also, he could swear that for a fraction of a second she glanced at his abs, which were exposed due to the fact that he wasn't wearing anything but a pair of tight leather trunks designed for swimming. Her supposed interest in his body him blush, but yeah, he probably had developed some nice muscles in the past couple of years, and oh, it really wasn't a big deal...

"What are you up to?" She tried to sound neutral, not admitting to herself that his half-naked presence certainly had an effect on her.

"I just came here for a swim. You know, the weather and all..."

"Swimming?" She asked, quirking an eyebrow, and her glance fell to his prosthetic.

"Oh, you mean this?" He raised his metal foot a bit. "Nah, I'm still a pretty good swimmer."

She chuckled, seriously doubting that he was any competition to her. Normally, she never would have mocked him about his disability, but the self-assured, cocky tone in his voice was offending. As if...

"You don't believe me?" He asked back, deliberately trying to tease her. He found it just a teensy-weensy bit amusing when she was annoyed, even though he knew he was risking getting some serious punches, but this time she surprisingly didn't feel the urge to punish him or answer his question.

"Okay, how about we race to the island?" Hiccup suggested when the silence between them started to grow awkward, pointing to the piece of land in the middle of the water.

"How about that," she agreed quickly and started to remove the boots she was still wearing.

"Whoever gets out of the water first, wins," he stated the simple rule while observing her naked feet for a while, finding her never-before-seen longish toes quite attractive.

Not noticing the secretive admiration, Astrid put on a serious face and headed for the rocks from which they'd be able to dive into the water. She waited until he caught up with her and then took a good look at him before they both jumped into the cool lake.

Since her two feet were stronger than his one plus the prosthetic, she came to the surface first, starting to do front crawls with all her strength. It was a nice effort, but since Hiccup compensated for many things with his arms, they were pretty sinewy and after a couple of well-executed butterfly strokes, he managed to leave her behind. When he reached the shore, he rushed out of the waves and sat down in the sand, putting his proud face on.

It was quite an achievement for him to beat Astrid in anything that required any type of fast movement, strength or dexterity.

He put his elbows down and leaned on them, amusedly watching her getting out of the water just a couple of seconds after him. She seemed pissed and coughed a few times, the bitter water she had gulped down was scratching her throat. She started to unbraid her hair, tearing down the seaweeds that somehow got tangled in it, mumbling a few carefully chosen curse words.

She looked like a very angry sea goddess with her wet body glistening in the orange rays of the Sun. He watched her in awe, it was hard not to.

"It wasn't fair. You're much taller than me," she complained while sitting down next to him. Her damp hair was brushing his shoulder, giving Hiccup a ticklish sensation, which he didn't mind at all. With his newly found confidence, he could not resist teasing her a bit more.

"And stronger," he said with the hugest smirk, but upon seeing her face turning green with fury, he immediately knew it wasn't his best idea.

"I'm stronger, that's not even a question," she hissed, looking at him with eyes the color of the raging ocean.

She was obviously in denial, stubbornly refusing the fact that he had developed impressive thews and grown many inches in the past couple of years.

"Is that so, m'lady?" He continued the taunting, even though he knew he was walking on the thinnest ice. But it was entertaining. He enjoyed how her gathering anger painted her face even more beautiful.

Her answer was a determined nod, with lips tightly pressed together in an effort to prevent herself from saying anything rude.

"How about we make a bet?" He suggested, liking a little bit too much that he had the means to piss her off.

"I'm listening..."

"Okay, how about that: the one who can pin the other to the ground for 5 seconds, wins."

She raised a brow and thought about it for a second. Timidly looking at his half naked body, she felt a bit unsure about the whole 'her being stronger' thing. He was certainly a lot bulkier than she remembered (and it was much to her liking, even if she would never admit it to herself), but she never backed out of anything.

She exercised on a daily basis. She was fast. And cunning. She took a last, lingering look at him and decided that she still had a very good chance...

"Deal," she said firmly "and if I win, you have to make breakfast for me every day. For a week."

"Astrid, you know I hate everything that people do in the kitchen."

"I believe, I do," she said with a little giggle when she saw the unpleasant expression on his face, feeling glad about finding his weak spot. "But if you're so sure of yourself, oh, mighty Hiccup, then why do you even care?" The ball was definitely on her court this time.

"I don't. I can make you breakfast, I guess... Or I could, but I won't since I'll be winning, big time." He couldn't resist the temptation and pushed her shoulder with a palm. For a moment, she debated breaking his wrist.

"Don't sass me," she advised, raising her clenched fist from the ground. "And what do you want if I happen to lose you, beastly champion of wrestling?"

"I'm not sure..." he said, trying to think over the possibilities, "I'm perfectly capable of making my own breakfast, so it's out of the question."

"Choose wisely, dork."

He shook his head. She was such a baby sometimes, it was just a stupid swimming contest between friends... Maybe he should choose a very easy task for her or even better, he should let her win at wrestling... But his hesitation made her irritated.

"Come on, klutz," she urged him while starting to poke his bare chest with a finger.

"Easy, easy," he said and grabbed her annoying index finger. He looked at her face. Angry but equally beautiful. Her onyx eyes, her rosy cheeks, her crimson lips... A thought came to his mind...

"Would you let go of my finger?!"

"Sure. Just stop poking me," he said, releasing her finger from his tight grip, still looking at her face. "Okay, I got it." He was hesitating for another second. "If I win... you have to kiss me every day for a week."

He couldn't believe he dared to say these words to her, but there was no turning back now, so he just enjoyed how her cheeks turned deep red upon comprehending what he had said.

"I like eggs for breakfast," she said finally in a chilly tone, giving him a murderous look, but never making any remarks about his insulting idea.

"It's on, then. 5 seconds."

In a blink of an eye, she jumped on his lap and with a strong and unexpected push to his chest, he was down on the ground.

He had to admit, that he didn't mind this position at all with her being top of him, but when she tried to grab his wrists, he pushed himself back on his elbows and raised his hips causing her to lose balance and falling right next to him in the sand with a loud thud.

He immediately went for her wrists, grasping them tight and pinning them down to the ground at each side of her head. She struggled heroically, trying to free her hands while he climbed over her painfully slowly, enjoying to the full that the lady of his life was twisting and wiggling under him.

"Five, four, three, two and one. I won!" With a triumphant smile he quickly got off her sitting down in the sand.

She was up on her feet sweeping the sand off from her body in no minute. The grains on her skin made her glitter and the soft breeze in the air was playing with her long golden curls. She was a majestic sight apart from the fact that she could kill him with her eyes.

"When do you want to start?" He asked, childishly mocking her with rounding his lips.

After hesitating for a second, she dropped on her knees and leaned very close to his cheeky lips.

"When I'll be wrinkly, toothless and disgusting," she hissed while her eyes were throwing daggers at him. "We didn't set the start date."

With that said, she was quickly back on her feet again and headed for the water to swim away from the terrible man who was gloating over her failure.

The 'terrible man' was following her with his eyes as she swam to the shore where she whistled to her Nadder who was patiently waiting for her rider to come back.

He felt disappointed.

He didn't know whether it was because of his completely out of character disrespectful behavior, or because of not getting what he wanted...

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At first Hiccup was a bit angry when Astrid walked out on him. 'What a cheater,' he thought, but on his way home, he reminded himself that his idea was utterly rude - at least compared to some innocent breakfast making.

Honestly, she had every right to act as she did and it wouldn't be nice to force her to do something that she didn't want to do, anyway. For the love of Freya, he wasn't sure about himself wanting to do it either...

Why on Earth did he come up with such an idiotic idea? This simple yet plainly stupid utterance now turned into some sort of a 'problem' and now he was overthinking as he always did with every problem he encountered in his life. He could literally hear the cogwheels clicking in his brain, making his head hurt and Gods, he really should be sleeping right now, but the unstoppable thoughts kept him awake.

The strangest part of this whole mess was that up until this point he had never even thought about actually kissing her. Like on the lips. With tongues involved. The grown-up way. Or whatever this thing was called. And he only had some vague ideas about how it should be properly done... Oh, every time it came into his mind now, he felt that his cheeks (and some less innocent parts of him) started to warm up and basically turn into flames.

Stupid, stupid teenage years...

He shouldn't be thinking about these things at all because Astrid was his friend. Like Fishlegs. Would he make the same bet with Fishlegs? Hel, no! He shivered at the thought of kissing... well basically anyone, but Astrid. Why was she any different then? Shouldn't she be on the same level as the rest of their friends?

Okay, she was a girl. Well, rather a young woman now, but Ruff belonged to the very same species, yet the thought of kissing her seemed almost as outrageous as putting his lips on Fishlegs'.

Shame on the blonde for confusing him and distracting his thoughts from more important things. Like dragons. Or work. Or sleeping...



because he really should have been sleeping now, he has to wake up early tomorrow and&#160;| and... Grrr... He didn't want to have these feelings. At least not right now, at the tender age of 17. He didn't have time for this, he had so many things on his plate right now.

Anyway, it seemed that these feelings weren't mutual at all. She refused him right on the spot. Of course from time to time she gave him a peck on his cheeks or lips, but that wasn't the real thing... Besides she hasn't done it in the past couple of months... What's more, thinking back it seemed that these were just mere friendly gestures. Like 'Let's give some charity kisses to this pathetic excuse for a Viking'. She most probably saw him as a timid and vulnerable creature who was in desperate need of reinforcement and she was noble enough to offer it to him.

Oh, Thor, for some painful minutes he felt that he desperately needed that kiss, which was strange because up until that point he never even realized that he was missing it from his life. It was a bit like his lost limb. It was missing from his life in every second, that was a fact, yet after years of living without it, it hardly ever came to his mind that he was actually missing a foot...

Maybe it was only because she denied the kisses. She refused him. That must be it.

He felt that one kiss would be more than enough. Like a proper one. He was not a greedy person at all, so one little kiss should do the trick. He didn't need seven. And perhaps kissing is not even a good thing at all. To tell the truth the whole concept of it seemed a bit disgusting. Not that he was disgusted by Astrid, quite the contrary, he really fancied a lot of things about her. Like the way she looked at him, the way she talked, the way she smelled, the way she looked...

But still. Tongues are revolting, big slimy snails in the mouth. They might taste good, though&#160;| and it seemed many people were into kissing (especially after a couple pints of mead). Hiccup wondered how Astrid might taste... From the smell of her it should be a combination of honey, winter lilies and sunshine... Oh, Gods, when did he become so cheesy?

Okay, he was just curious. It was only natural. He liked unknown territories, it was his nature. That's why he didn't need more than one kiss. It was like a bucket list, dragon riding - checked, killing a giant dragon &#160; checked, kissing Astrid &#160; checked. It wasn't like he wanted to kill six more giant dragons, not to mention he only had three limbs left.

Some things should only be tried once. Or not at all. Yeah, Astrid must be right, they shouldn't do this. Probably he repelled her. That must have been it. She basically ran off.

'Well, thank you very much, Astrid, for not liking me at all, probably I don't like you either,' came the angry and rather exhausted thought after thinking about it for a couple of hours. 'Yep, everything is cool, I don't even care now, I'm gonna sleep like a baby.' He tried to do it. It wasn't his fault that he didn't feel a happy baby at all, but more like an empty, broken nutshell...

When he woke up in the morning he felt so lucky that he had promised Gobber to be at the forge early and he hoped that if he worked hard enough he would be distracted from whatever happened last night, because honestly, his stupid afterthoughts were more than annoying now.

He was sure that by the end of the day he would not think about that blond vixen who bewitched him.

One hour into work and his wish was granted, although not in the most pleasant way, to say the least. He was standing in the forge, at the wall, in a petrified state. His mind was pretty much blank, apart from the only thought that kept running through his brain. It echoed three sentences one after the other in an endless loop. 'Don't move. Don't even blink. Stop your heart, if you can.'

These were the only thoughts he had when the sharp blade was cutting into his skin...

## 2. The Dinner and the Kiss

"Do you think it's sharp enough?! " shouted his attacker, "Because I don't! And I'm not paying for this, but you're going to pay for it!"

Hiccup felt that a little trail of blood ran down on his Adam's apple... It was kind of ticklish. He had no idea what to do now as he had never thought that danger could be lurking in the forge... Well, back in the old days when dragons attacked them, it was natural to be alerted in all places and at all times, but since these things seemed to happen, even the most cautious Vikings became laid back and relaxed. Careless and inattentive. Not to mention Hiccup, who actually trusted people, even those he probably shouldn't have had.

He was nothing like Astrid, who was always alarmed and reacted in quarter of a second to every threat she was faced with. What would she do now? What would she do if a complete idiot was pushing her to the wall, holding a freshly sharpened knife to her throat simply because he was not content with the work of the blacksmith's apprentice? What would she do if she had nothing but her bare hands to defend herself? He only wished he could ask her, but unfortunately she wasn't around.

His master, Gobber, however was close enough. Probably he wasn't as fast and crafty as Astrid, but when he saw that his favorite lad was in a very big trouble he never hesitated. His hammer-hand came down on the boy's attacker's helmet with a loud bang. He hit him a couple more times, hard enough to put the man to the ground. When he quieted down, Gobber kicked him in pure delight, just to make sure that he stayed where he was.

It was a violent, yet quite understandable reaction, but what's more important, it was very effective. The young man was saved and he was only a tiny bit hurt, it seemed, as he was panting at the wall pressing a palm to his throat. It could have been worse. A lot worse. The problems with these kind of crazy asses is that you never know when they go completely cuckoo...

There was a large crowd of people in front of the shop, the news of the village idiot attacking the chief's son traveled fast among the people of Berk. Most of them seemed worried, others just came down for the show; for granted, without the dragons' attack Berk was a little bit boring these days for the vicious Vikings.

Suddenly with a loud rumble the smithy's door shattered into a thousand little pieces. A gigantic man, also known as Stoick the Vast, was standing behind the remains of the door frame, his eyes looking like that of a rabid dog.

He wasn't very far when he heard that one of the most freakish persons of Berk attacked his son. Normally, Viking fathers weren't that worried about their offspring, and even though Hiccup was officially known as the town hero / dragon killer in the past years, Stoick still saw him as the scrawny little thing he was in his earlier days, plus he was the only family he had and losing himâ€¦ Nah, he couldn't even think about that possibility.

The chief stepped inside and immediately noticed his son, who was coughing and doubled up in the left corner of the forge. He had his hand on his throat but, thanks Odin, other than that he seemed fine. Gobber was in the middle of the room, packing up a pile of flesh that roughly resembled to a human, whistling a triumphant tune.

"What on Earth has happened here?" asked the tribal leader, his strong voice sounding like a thunderstorm.

"Aye, that idiot, Cess. Ye know, we agreed on not to give him any weapons long ago, but he came in to have his carving knife sharpened. Who'd have thought he goes berserk and attacks Hiccup?" summarized the blacksmith, shaking his head in disbelief. "Why did we even need village idiots? Should have fed him to the dragons when we had the chance."

Stoick went to his son who has just managed to collect himself and put a tender, fatherly arm on his shoulder, "Son are ye alright?" Hiccup nodded faintly. "Okay, then I want you to go back our house and wait for me until I clean this mess up."

Before the boy could deny commandment, his titanic father added, "No dragon training for ye today."

Hiccup had no other choice but to obey his father's order. He didn't want to argue about him being absolutely fine, because to tell the truth he was still a little bit shocked. And he could miss one training session, that was for sure. He might as well go and ride his dragon later on, that's close enough to training. And... well... probably it was also a good thing that he didn't have to face Astrid today.

Not in his current, vulnerable state.

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Astrid arrived to the afternoon training a little bit late. She didn't really fancy the idea of meeting Hiccup after all the things that had happened the night before and she prolonged leaving her home as long as she could. She felt ashamed. She knew that the boy won fair and square and she was the one who chickened out. She was not a

generous loser to say the least, but kissing him even once sounded as the scariest idea ever, let alone seven times in a row.

Besides, a gentleman would never ever take chances on his \_milady\_. Or what. Was she still his milady? She was confused. Distracted. And afraid. She, the fierce warrior, was afraid of kissing a boy. A \_regular\_ boy. Who she actually \_liked\_. A bit.

Of course, he was annoying sometimes and awkward, but far less annoying and awkward than the rest of the village and she valued him for that. And the more she thought about it, the more obvious it was that she was curious. She was 17 and she never had any experience with the other gender (or with the same, for that matter) and deep down in her heart she really wanted to know and learn things. About boys. Or should she say men? Were they old enough to be called men and women? Hiccup still had his boyish features, but he also had stubble on his chin. Astrid wondered how it'd feel if she rubbed her palm to his jawâ€¦

What if she suggested him to do like one or two kisses? Instead of seven. Probably it was just the number that scared her. Seven sounded far too much. Maybe he'd agree on lowering the bar and didn't consider her a cheater and a sore loser after all. With that thought she comforted her uncertainty and decided to behave at the training as if she had done nothing wrong or questionable.

Yes, she would definitely approach him with this suggestion, so instead of this total awkwardness everything would be all right. One kiss, maximum two kisses and everything would be the same. And then they'd be best buddies again and do fun stuff together, like they always did. Yay.

She arrived at the arena in an elevated mood - at least compared to the unusually unstable state she was in during the morning - and quickly said hello to Ruff, Tuff, Fishlegs and even to Snotlout but... \_someone\_ was missing.

She immediately sensed that something was wrong, because Hiccup who basically lived (and almost died) for the dragons would never miss a training session. So she cleared her throat and decided to turn to Fishlegs, because he was still the most able-minded of all four of them. "Erm, where is Hiccup?" She hoped she sounded as neutral as she intended to be.

"Haven't you heard it?" Fishlegs asked back, looking at her with disbelief in his eyes. "I thought everybody had heard it."

"Heard what?!" A very bad feeling crept up her spine and she hated Fishlegs for withholding the information she so desperately needed.

"There was quite a fuss..."

"Spit it out or I'll cut you up," Astrid almost shouted at him, getting more and more nervous by the minute, not even trying to hide her worries anymore, intimidating Fishlegs to the point where he wasn't able to answer her. He knew what Astrid was capable of, he had seen it many times.

"Astrid, I think Berk has seen enough violence today," the big guy

mumbled finally, shaking like an autumn leaf. The lack of information and the mention of 'violence' made Astrid even more furious. She jumped on him and even though she was a lot lighter than Fishlegs, the sudden impact caused him to fall to the ground. Astrid, now sitting on top of him, put her right fist up in the air as if she was about to punch him in the face.

"Just answer the question. What happened to Hiccup?"

Ruffnut who was standing near, watched them quietly, not wanting to interrupt their entertaining performance, but Astrid's sudden burst of violence made her quirk a brow.

Of course they were all good friends and they all cared about each other, but Astrid's reaction seemed exaggerated... But she might as well do a favor to Fishlegs and save his ass from a stronger person. Ruffnut felt so overly nice when she stepped closer to them and tried to calm Astrid down. "Take it easy, sis, nobody was harmed."

As it turned out the comforting words of a female friend weren't quite enough for Astrid this time.

"Would someone illuminate me properly, before I burn this whole village down?" screamed the girl, agitated and shaking with anger. Ruffnut was not the sharpest tool in the shed, but she understood that it was probably for the best to tell her what had happened before Astrid harmed someone. Or all of them.

"So, that idiot Cess, you know, Mildew's ex next door neighbor, came to the forge in the morning and asked Hiccup to sharpen his knife. When Hiccup did the job, it seems that the client wasn't overjoyed with the result and being an idiot, he grabbed Hiccup by the neck, pushed him to the wall and put the blade to his throat to test its sharpness. That's it."

"And?!"

"Oh, yeah, Gobber beat the crap out of him with his hammer-hand. Boy, he looked... I don't know... well, he looked flat. And bloody."

"It was awesome!" added Tuffnut cheerfully, high-fiving his sister. "Best man pile ever!"

"Then Stoick wanted Hiccup to stay at home 'till he gets a boat and transports Cess to Outcast Island. He looked quite angry, and said he never wanted to see him on Berk again."

"So... where is Hiccup now?" asked Astrid in a little bit calmer voice while getting off of the still shaky Fishlegs.

"In his room, I guess," added Ruffnut. "Where else could he be? He was grounded for being a lame Viking."

"Okay, I got to go now," said Astrid quickly, not caring a least bit about what the others might think about her worrying too much about Hiccup.

"But Astrid..." started Fishlegs, still lying on the ground, "What about training?"

"Don't care about it," said Astrid quickly, jumping on her Nadder.

§§§

She felt a bit wobbly and weak when she arrived to the front door of the chief's house. Her thoughts were getting back to a horrible vision of Hiccup getting killed by some random freak, not matter how hard she tried to erase the negative feelings. She needed to see him, wanted to be sure that he was all right, but after last night, she had to collect all her courage to knock on the massive wooden door. The door immediately opened and the huge chief towered over the nervous girl.

"Hey, Astrid. Can I help ye?"

"Hello chief, I just wanted to check on Hiccupâ€¦ Um, I've heard what happened... And I've brought him a little something," she said, holding up the sack she had collected from her home on the way to the Haddock house. She found it very hard to sound relatively indifferent.

"Astrid, I'm actually glad you are here," started the chief. He stepped out from the house and closed the door behind himself to get some privacy with Astrid. "Listen, lass. I'm just about to leave with the ship that's taking Cess to the shores of Outcast Island; I won't be back here for most part of the night and I'd appreciate if ye could look after Hiccup while I'm gone. Could ye do that for me?"

It was no question that the mighty father was deeply worried about his son, and Astrid, even though she felt a bit awkward, knew that she had to obey her chief.

"Of course, I'll do that."

"Okay, then go up to his room, I have to leave now. \_Thank ye\_, Astrid." With that said he walked away, leaving the confused girl at the threshold of his house.

§§§

Astrid carefully opened the door and then silently closed it behind herself. She went to the stairs and before taking the first step, she put down her little bundle on the floor and arranged her braid. She couldn't understand why she had done it, must have been some kind of an instinct, because she was absolutely sure that she didn't care what Hiccup thought about her looks. Or did she? Thor, why were feelings so complicated?

As she started to walk up the squeaky stairs an irritated voice came out from Hiccup's room.

"Dad, I've already told you a million times that I'm perfectly all right. No need to come up every ten minutes."

Astrid reached the half-opened door of the room and slipped inside.

There he was, sitting at his desk, drawing something, as usual. Her heart lightened, because nothing seemed to be wrong or unusual about

him, but his voice was trembling a bit, either from the previous fear or the present annoyance.

"Sorry to disturb you, Hiccup," she started upon stepping inside his room.

"Oh, it's... you," said the boy looking at her, but not looking happy at all about seeing her.

"Look, Hiccup...", she started, but the boy stood up and interrupted her.

"Astrid, thanks for coming by. I'm perfectly fine, it's just a little booboo, nothing more," said Hiccup showing the small red line just above his Adam's apple. "See? It's nothing."

Astrid felt that how desperately he was trying to get rid of her which was quite an unusual thing, yet still pretty understandable after the other night. But she had already made up her mind about making up to him, so she decided on spitting out what she wanted to say, even if it was a lot harder than she thought.

"Listen, Hiccup. It's not just that... I mean I was really worried about you, for Thor's sake, I've almost beaten up Fishlegs, but it's not just that..."

Hiccup didn't say a word, just looked at her, waiting patiently to collect her thoughts and finish what she had started.

"Okay. So I think I was very unfair to you last night and I want to make up to you."

The boy looked confused. "I'm the one who should be apologizing. It was a rude suggestion."

"Yet, I agreed on our bet and then well... it's not the first time I'm not fulfilling a bet I've lost" The embarrassed girl was fixing her boots while talking, not daring to look into the young man's eyes even when the silence after the last words she uttered became unbearable.

But it was a now or never situation.

"Look, I want to make you a special dinner. I have some fish and herbs and those vegetables that I don't find totally disgusting." Astrid raised up her eyes and the sack she was holding.

When his stomach groaned at the promise of a nice dinner, she winked at him and held out a hand kindly. "Let's go to the shore and bury the hatchet. I don't want you to hate me for the rest of our lives," added the girl regaining a little bit of her confidence.

"I'd never hate you," whispered Hiccup and to his surprise, he casually took the hand she was offering.

Â§Â§Â§

Dinner was awesome. Astrid really outdid herself, even if she was not a fan of anything that is considered to be 'girlie' stuff. Like cooking. Or hanging out with a boy in a romantic environment. Like

lying in the sand, next to a campfire. But that was what they were doing now and it seemed so right. Comforting. Enjoyable. Exciting? Probably, just a little bit. \_Uh-oh\_, it was definitely exciting.

With an elbow in the sand, she rested her head on her open palm, looking away in the distance, spending the past ten minutes quietly thinking about how to tell him that she was willing to pay off her debt. Or at least part of it. It was going to be awkward. Even more so if he says that there was no need for it or he was not interested in doing it, because it was just some kind of a joke to him...

They were lying on a large woven blanket, big enough for both of them. Hiccup was on his back, one hand tucked under his head, the other one casually lying on his stomach. He had no shirt on, again, as it was still unusually warm. A tiny part of Astrid's soul wished it was just a little bit colder. She was distracted by his body and her eyes kept on wandering back to his abs. She felt ashamed. It's not that the boy could have noticed it; his eyes were looking at the sky with the million stars above him, but she was very well aware of the fact that she was basically ogling him. Good Gods... What has she turned into? A needy little rose bud or whatever girlie girls resemble toâ€¦|

She desperately tried to behave casually.

"I'm sorry about that," she said, breaking up the silence.

"What? Why? It was really delicious. For granted, I'm sometimes forced to eat raw fish and I don't complain much about that either, but hey, trust me, it was the nicest meal I've had in the past 3 years," said Hiccup cheerfully, turning his warm gaze towards the girl, looking into her eyes. "My dad is not the best... okay, let's just say we are all lucky that he is not the \_chef\_ but the \_chief\_ of this village."

Astrid smiled a little at his joke, but her face quickly turned serious again. "No, not about that. Last night..."

"Okay, here we go again," he answered rolling his eyes, feeling unhappy about her choice of topic. He was over it... Okay, ha wasn't over it, but he wanted to be. "Astrid, no problem, don't feel bad. I've already forgotten it, you should do that too," he added a moment later.

"No. I want to \_pay off my debt\_," she said, turning her eyes to the distant water, not being brave enough to stand his gaze and therefore missing the hilarious 'Wait, what?' look on the boy's face...

She took a deep breath before letting everything out. "I'm just a scaredy-cat. A coward dog. A poor excuse for a Viking, but... Hiccup, I'm only afraid of it because I don't know \_how\_ to do it."

Hiccup had to laugh. It was the cutest thing he has ever heard.

"Laugh all you want, you popular village hero." Astrid sounded a bit bitter, covering her eyes with the palm she was leaning on. Hiccup sat up and put a hand on her shoulder casually. His fingers felt warm through the thin fabric of the tunic she was wearing. He was still



giggling a bit, trying to collect himself to be able to calm her. There was no need for another misunderstanding.

"I'm not laughing at you. I mean... oh, guess what. I've no idea how to kiss either."

Now it was her time to be surprised.

"You... don't?"

"How would I? I've never done it in my life," he said, laugh bursting out from him again. This time Astrid joined in.

"Aren't we just the most pathetic teenagers this village has ever seen?" she said amused, not covering her eyes anymore, but looking straight into his.

"I'm sure we can figure it out, though," added Hiccup. "I mean... I think we only have to sort of lock our lips and then... you know. Things will happen."

"This sounds a bit awkward," said Astrid in a serious tone.

"I know but... we might as well give it a try. You know, the first one might not be perfect, but..." Hiccup hoped he sounded convincing, he remembered how he wanted that little kiss earlier and now, when it seemed that he had a chance, he decided on not letting it go.

"... by the time we reach to number seven, we'll be professionals?" asked Astrid with a little grin in the corner of her mouth.

"Yeah. Could be."

"So... what's the plan?"

"Huh. What if we just lie back on our sides, facing each other, closing our eyes and scoot closer to each other, until, you know...our lips touch?" Hiccup tried to sound as objective as he could, but a little tremble in his voice gave away his true feelings.

"That could work," she said ignoring his shaky voice. She obediently put her hand down and lay on her side, shutting her eyes slowly. "Just promise me you won't laugh," she added a second, quietly as a mouse.

"I won't," he whispered back while he started to crawl to her. When he was close enough, he put his left hand on her hips. He felt that the girl was trembling under his hand, either from the coldness of his fingers or simply because he was touching her. Trembling or not, with eyes tightly closed, Astrid was looking for a more comfortable place for her hand, so she placed it under his arm first, then reached up to his shoulder blade. Her touch was electrifying, and 'Gods', thought Hiccup, 'this was really happening...'

And then there she was. Her lips. Softly touching his. Still trembling a bit as she placed the smallest, shiest kiss on his lips. He quickly reacted; it was more an instinct than something he knew or learned. He opened his mouth slightly, giving enough space for the girl's tongue to enter. And it did. Although he still felt that she

was shaking, somehow it started to work. Rhythm and pace seemed to be okay after a couple of seconds and somehow this whole utterly awkward situation turned into the sweetest experience ever.

As for Astrid, she felt uncomfortable and weak at first, but Hiccup was right, they quickly figured out together how these grown-up things worked. She felt a bit proud, probably they weren't the most awkward teenagers of all times, merely just two kids who had to gain more experience. And it was hell of an experience...

By the time she felt that his tender hand reached the nape of her neck and eager fingers started to brush her sensitive skin, she thought that she didn't want to let go of his lips ever again... But of course they had to part eventually.

Hiccup let go of her nape and looked at her softly for a couple of seconds then lay back to his original position, looking at the stars again, trying to make a serious face, fighting the wide grin that eventually took over his mouth. Then he just gave up on trying to hide his happiness and closed his eyes, taking some deep breaths.

Astrid, leaning on her elbow again, looked at him curiously, being quite unsure about the thing they had just done. It felt amazing, for granted, but she was deeply disturbed by her own insecurities. She was sure that this meant a lot of things for both of them.

But she didn't know whether it was the beginning of something or the end.

### 3. The Parents and the Forge

Astrid woke up more exhausted than she felt when she went to bed. She never had problems with waking up early and going for a fly with her Nadder before heading to the training arena, but today a joy ride on the beloved dragon simply seemed impossible. In fact, she was already late from training...

She couldn't really understand herself. It was all fine up until the point she and Hiccup left the shore and headed back to the village. But when she saw the silhouettes of the houses somehow she started to feel ashamed. And vulnerable. She hastily barked a goodbye to the lanky boy standing next to her and ran back home.

She tried to open their door very quietly because it was late at night and her mom was a bit nosy these days, asking all sorts of questions about where she had been, what she had done... As if she was a trouble maker. But she wasn't, she always did the right thing. Her great strength came with great responsibility. She didn't do anything wrong this time either, so how come then, that she was having this guilt trip?

She couldn't understand why her face was burning with shame.

Oh, Gods, what if it's visible? What if her mom and everyone else would see that she was kissed? Did she look different? She touched her lips. They seemed fine. She licked them. They didn't taste like him anymore. Pff, it was so strange to know that he actually did have a taste... What a disgusting thought, though. Okay, it's not

that he had a disgusting taste, it was quite alright or... ah, how should she know? He was the first to be tasted by her.

And just why was she still thinking about him? She shouldn't be. They made a stupid bet, she lost, she'll pay it off and then... then it's going to be over. Everything will go back to normal. It's not like she had real romantic feelings for him. Well, of course, they were friends and he changed a lot in these past few years, but she felt that most of the time she still saw the gawky young boy in him. Although, it was true that sometimes he was clumsy to the point when she actually found it quite cute and she felt like giving a peck somewhere on his face, but that was all. She found him cute but not that cute. Right?

And... She cannot have any serious feelings for him. She cannot have any serious feelings for anyone. Feelings just mess up everything and she didn't need that sort of trouble in her life. On the other hand, it was a nice thing in the physical sense; it gave her the butterflies and the world seemed to turn upside down when their lips touched... She considered it to be normal, they were teenagers, they were eager to know things and...

"Where have you been?" Came the disapproving question from the dark. Oh, why hasn't her mom gone to bed already? Is it always going to be like that now? She couldn't get used to having a hound sniffing after her all the time...

"Out," she answered angrily, then ran up to her bedroom, trying to cover her face with damp hands as she was only half-sure that there were no visible signs of disgrace on her cheeks... Up in her room she quickly undressed and went to bed. She felt pretty tired, but sleep didn't come easy; her mind was filled with a huge turmoil of emotions. She had second thoughts about this whole kissing non-sense and she wished she could just avoid a certain tall, dark and sometimes surprisingly handsome rider for a couple of days, until her head clears up.

Â§Â§Â§

Hiccup on the other hand had one of the best sleeps of his life. He woke up early and went on a ride with Toothless; they greeted the sunrise from up above the clouds and the world somehow seemed even more colorful than usual. Everything felt so energetic and light now, and the dark thoughts he previously had about the unexpected attack in the forge crawled away to a well-hidden place in his mind, silently hiding under the surface.

When he went back home after the flight, he started to make breakfast for himself and his dad. It seemed like a good idea. Upon noticing his son's early morning efforts in their kitchen, Stoick raised a brow. Probably it was the first time he saw his son willingly do something that involved preparing food. He was even humming a silly little tune while getting busy with the eggs and the bread.

"Somebody's in a good mood... Everything alright, son?" Asked the giant dad curiously, interrupting the soft humming.

"Yeah... why?"

"Because ye hardly ever have time to eat breakfast, let alone to cook it. It's not that I mind it, I mean, ye still eat like a bird compared to a real Viking man, but..."

"Oh, I just had a good night sleep and a nice ride and I don't know... This morning feels different and I guess I woke up hungry."

"So, where were ye last night before this nice sleep of yers?"

"Erm... last night?" What a strange question... Why did his dad even care? He was out most nights in the past 5 years.

"Yes. Ye know, while I was shipping that idi... never mind. So, where were ye?"

"Oh, I was just at the shore with Astrid. She cooked me dinner."

"Astrid? The Astrid I know?" The mighty chief didn't even try to hide his sheer surprise.

"Ye-es..."

"What is this cooking craze? Is this what kids do nowadays?"

"It's... it's just a coincidence, I guess," said Hiccup munching on a crust, not feeling hungry anymore.

"Son... can I ask ye a question?"

"Sure."

"What do you think of Astrid?"

"What do I think of...? What kind of a question is that? I mean she is alright. She is my friend and..." Hiccup started to talk so quickly that his father found it hard to understand. But he always gabbled when he felt embarrassed...

"Is there something I should know about?" He had noticed a long time ago that his son had feelings for the comely young lass and when they were kids, it seemed so safe, innocent and chaste, but they were definitely growing up now and Stoick, being a father, had his concerns.

Hiccup paused for a moment before answering. "Nahâ€¦ No. I don't think so. Aaand... I'm sorry but I have to leave now. You know, training and all..."

If skipping breakfast meant that he could avoid the awkward questions, he was ready to go.

"Yeah. Training. Go train. Nice chat, son." He decided on showing mercy on his blushing son for the time being and released him.

"Yeah, right. Oh, I won't come home early tonight; I have to be at

the forge."

"Okay. Mhm. Okay. Have a good day."

"You too."

"Oh, one more thing."

Hiccup turned back from the door, sounding just a tiny bit annoyed.

"Yes, dad?"

"Could ye do me a favor? If you will ever think of her in a \_different way\_, just I don't know... could ye let me know?"

Hiccup cocked an eyebrow. "Sure... But I don't think it's going to happen. I mean not in the near future."

"Son, you know you're getting..."

"Yes, dad, I know the story about me getting older and the chief stuff. I just... I don't think I'm ready. And if you'll excuse me, I..."

Stoick shook his head when his son left in a hurry. Ever since he was born he constantly worried about him. He was half as big as a normal baby should be (quarter size of a standard Viking baby) and then he was growing so slowly...

Yes, he finally became a well-respected member of the community but now he should consider establishing a family of his own and protecting their bloodline, but it seemed that nothing mattered to him anymore but the dragons.

For Thor's sake, how could he make him understand that these things are important in a man's life? Especially if the certain young man was the would-be chief of a tribe.

Â§Â§Â§

Hiccup arrived to the training arena somewhat agitated. The blessed morning mood soon shifted away after the son-dad talk. Why does it always have to be so awkward between them? He jumped off of his dragon said some vague hellos to the others and headed to his office. He was in desperate need of a little silence.

For two wonderful hours he found peace in his newly established haven. A couple of weeks ago he turned one of the old pens into an office, because he needed a place where he could store the growing number of books, pamphlets, charts and diagrams he and Fishlegs created about the dragons. But what was even more important, he needed a place where things were calm enough and he could think, draw and administer by himself.

It's not like he didn't like the other riders, it's just sometimes they were a bit too much...

Someone always ended up whining or complaining about mostly ridiculous stuff and Hiccup couldn't help but feel that he was running a kindergarten full of children with serious behavioral issues.

And then came the knock on the door, as usual. He rolled his eyes. Most of the time it was Fishlegs who disturbed his blissful solitude first, complaining about Snotlout or the twins. It took him a couple of seconds to collect himself and answer the door and the constant knocking wasn't helping with his starting head ache.

"Coming, coming," he said, trying to calm down the impatient knocker. In front of his door a slim and agitated young Viking girl was tapping with her feet.

"What can I do for you today, Ruffnut?" He asked, trying to sound polite instead of annoyed.

"Inside, Hiccs, I need to talk to you, like now." Ruffnut pushed him away from the door, entering his safe place with determined steps.

Hiccup closed the door behind her; for reasons unknown, he felt that it was better if the others didn't hear them.

"Look, if it's about your brother, I don't even know what more I could say..."

"Nah, it's not about him. Although I still think you should kick him out. Or just kick him."

"I think we have already covered that issue," said Hiccup trying to end the conversation as soon as possible. "I'm not going to kick him."

"Eh, because you're lame. Anyways, it's not about him."

"Okay, then who's it about?"

"It's Astrid."

Astrid? Why does everyone want to talk to him about Astrid? He doesn't want to talk about her; he prefers talking to her. And it just came to his mind that he didn't even say a proper 'hello' to her this morning; he was too upset because of his dad and... He remembered seeing her from the corner of his eyes standing unusually still. And it has just occurred to him that after last night it was probably a bit rude not to greet her nicely... At least he should have winked at her or something. Gods, how do you say 'hello' to a girl who let you put your lips on hers? Were there any rules?

"Are you with me, klutz?" Ruffnut's harsh voice interrupted his brooding.

"Sorry, sorry, I was just... so it's Astrid. What about Astrid?"

"Dunno, she is just acting weird today. Haven't you noticed it?"

Hiccup went back to the door, opened it half-way and glanced out. Astrid was throwing axes at the barrels, with pure passion, but it was her thing...

"Well, that's what she normally does, doesn't she?" Asked Hiccup sounding clueless.

"Yeah. That's really Astrid-y. But she has been doing it for the past 2 hours and I think her fingers are bleeding. Or the handle of her axe, it's hard to tell. I mean, I tried to put her off, but she just mumbled something about minding my own damn business."

"But what could I do? If I tried to stop her, she would cut me in half."

"Nah, I don't want you to stop her, it's kind of entertaining. I just was wondering whether you knew what had happened to her, because not two days ago she was quite okay."

"And why should I know anything about her problems? I mean we're buddies, but you're her best friend." Hiccup tried to avert the conversation. He feared Ruffnut. She wasn't particularly smart, on the contrary, but she had this strange ability, an unexplained instinct to see the motivations behind people's acts.

"I also went looking for her last night and she wasn't at home. And she wasn't riding her dragon, because I saw Stormfly..." She looked at him as if she was accusing him of something and he felt that an unpleasant feeling was forming in his guts.

"Actually, she was with me. She erm... cooked dinner for me."

"What? She never cooks. Gods, I have to call a witch doctor now, she must be possessed."

"No, it was... I think she felt sorry because of... what happened to me at the forge."

"She felt sorry for you not being able to protect yourself instead of despising you?"

Hiccup found it hard to admit, but she had a point. Astrid never ridiculed the weaker, but she certainly didn't fancy the faint-of-heart.

"Now that you mention it, it does sound a bit weird," admitted Hiccup, scratching his head. "You know what? I'll just cancel training. That will hopefully stop her."

"Okay... That sounds about right. And Hiccup..."

"Yes?"

"You should pay more attention to her."

"I will," he promised quietly while grabbing Ruffnut's elbow, seeking her out.

His headache fully kicked in.

§§§

After training was cancelled Astrid went home and tried to have a rest. Her fingers hurt pretty much, they seemed swollen and bruised,

but she didn't really care. Pain was always a welcomed feeling for the warrior kind. But her mom once again was after her all afternoon, giving her the stupidest chores one can imagine, so instead of some well-deserved midday slumber she was running back and forth in the village bringing and taking things all over the place. She did all the tasks her mother had burdened her with, grinding her teeth but without a word of complaint, in hopes of having a peaceful, undisturbed night.

It was already dark when she got home from the last errand and put down the two huge buckets of water her mom had asked for earlier. She flopped down on a chair at their dining table massaging one hand with the other.

Her fingers were throbbing again, it wasn't the wisest decision to carry those buckets, but it was never a good idea to go against her mother. As she was sitting there and finally had nothing to do, her thoughts drifted back to Hiccup.

Apart from catching a glimpse of him in the morning she had absolutely no contact with him. Should she be looking for him? She hasn't even paid half of her debt... She wondered whether he waited for her to show up at his door or something... Nah, he'd never expect it. Probably he doesn't even care about the whole ordeal at all. It's not like he paid special attention to her this morning, truth be told, he didn't pay any attention at all...

She felt too tired to figure this out. She will excuse herself if missing 'kiss No2' comes up anytime at all, but she was pretty sure that it won't. Not with Hiccup. She sighed with relief; she didn't feel like kissing at all.

"Oh, you're back!" Her mom's words woke her up from her belated daydream. "I need you to do one last thing today."

"Mom, I'm tired and..."

"Astrid, I don't really care. If you didn't go out at night, you wouldn't be tired." Her mother was a lot stricter than she used to be, but she didn't want to argue about it. Not now. Not when a heavy fatigue was digesting her soul.

"Okay, what can I do for you?" She asked after a deep sigh in a tone that almost sounded pathetic. Her mother put three rusty swords on the table.

"I need you to go to the forge and have them cleaned up and sharpened."

"Mom... but what if there's no one at the forge? It's pretty late."

"Non-sense. I've talked to Hiccup, he's expecting them." 'Oh, Gods, Hiccup is expecting her? What a splendid turn of events,' she thought bitterly, feeling way too tired to deal with him or her own insecurities.

"Okay, let me just... change into fresh clothes," she said moving like a rag doll (actually, she felt like one), but her mom once again didn't show any sympathy. Dear Gods, it was the everyday family life



that made the Hofferson girls tough for centuries...

Â§Â§Â§

Once his headache was gone, Hiccup started to enjoy that he was alone in the forge, even though Gobber left him with a long list of things to do and it was almost unbearably hot in the smithy.

He had no company and no one disturbed him for hours except for Mrs. Hofferson who dropped by and asked him to mend a couple of her swords. Hiccup agreed to it, although he was planning on sewing a new saddle for Toothless later on the old one being a little bit worn by now. But it could wait. Mrs. Hofferson seemed so desperate about her swords mumbling about weapons having souls or something.

He didn't really have the strength to pay attention to her because of his severe headache. Now he wondered whether she'd bring in the swords or her daughter... Astrid... He hasn't thought about her for the past hours with the headache and all, but now he was kind of excited about possibly meeting her, although he knew it was just for the sake of business.

Should he remind her about the debt? Nah, she was very well aware of it and if she never even mentions it, it can only mean that... well, that he sucked at kissing. Wouldn't be a big surprise, though, he was not the player-type. And he really shouldn't be wasting this much time thinking about such an unimportant aspect of life...

He shook his head trying to clear his mind and went out to cool down a bit. It was already getting dark and the streets were strangely empty. Then it came into his head that there's going to be a huge summer feast at the Meade Hall the next night and his village mates were probably tried to get some rest before an evening full of mead and drunken Viking fights.

It's not that he didn't fancy these gatherings, it was just very bad timing.

He stretched out his arms and took a huge breath before going back to the forge. That incinerator. He immediately took off his tunic and threw it on the bed Gobber had put in the forge a couple weeks ago. Hiccup never asked why he needed it in the smithy, but Gobber was often out these days and he talked quite a few times about a certain widow, Mrs. Jernson... Still, the bed remained a mystery; Gobber lived next to the forge and as far as Hiccup knew it, he had a perfectly well functioning bedroom. But it was better not to ask.

He decided on continuing his work and looked for his hammer. He wiped his forehead with a cloth; he was already sweating and he hasn't even started to hammer. Soon, a small knock on the door made him turn back. He opened it and peeked his head out not wanting to expose his naked upper body to just anyone. Behind the door stood Astrid with a bunch of swords in her hands, and even though the lights were dim, Hiccup immediately noticed how tired she seemed with the dark circles around her eyes.

"May I come in?" She asked with a small, suppressed yawn.

"Sure, Astrid, sure," he answered, opening the door and to his own surprise he didn't head straight for his tunic. He had no problem

Astrid seeing him in a semi-undressed state. It's only normal to feel comfortable around your friends, right? Besides, it was still really hot in the forge.

>"So, your mom...?"<p>

"Yeah, she forced me to come here," she answered, putting the swords on the table. Hiccup stepped closer to examine them. They were just a little bit rusty and dull. It won't take more than an hour to mend them.

"You look tired," he said thoughtfully, still looking at the swords.

"I am, I... had a rough night."

"Sorry about that. You are more than welcome to use Gobber's bed," he gestured towards the corner of the room. She really looked tired.

"Gods, thanks, Hiccup." Astrid hurried to the bed, grabbing and throwing away Hiccup's tunic from the top of the bed. "You're right, it's burning here," she added and with a quick move she got rid of her own tunic and tossed it to the ground, next to his. Hiccup looked at her while she kicked her boots off and lay down on the top of the several pelts that covered the bed. It was nice to know that she was comfortable around him as well.

"I'll try to be as silent as possible," he said softly a minute later, but surprisingly enough she was fast asleep by then.

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Roughly an hour later the swords were as good as new or even better. Hiccup liked the idea that he had company and found Astrid entertaining even when she was sleeping. Yeah, she was snoring a little bit, which made him grin the whole time.

At first he regularly looked at her checking if she was alright then she turned to her side and yeah... her breast bindings revealed some flesh and Hiccup felt that it was not really an honorable thing to stare at a sleeping lady's cleavage, although the sight was pleasure to his eyes.

He grabbed the swords and put a piece of leather around them carefully tying them with a string. He left the package on the table and went to the bed.

He looked at peacefully sleeping beauty. With her eyes closed, her eyelashes seemed incredibly long. His eyes shifted to her cleavage again then feeling it a bit awkward, he looked further down to her flat belly. He discovered a small trail of sweat running down from her navel towards the hem of her leggings. It was really hard not to swipe it away, but then again, it would be weird to wake someone up by touching their stomach, so instead he just gently shook her shoulder. It was remarkably easy to wake her up.

"Are you done?" She asked, stretching out her arms, eyes still being closed.

"Yup," he answered stepping back a little to let her sit up.

"Good." She entertained him with tired little smile.

"You can go home and have a decent sleep."

"Oh, I will," she said while putting her boots back on, feeling a bit cockier after the much needed sleep. "But we still have some business to do..." It was a mystery even for her how she managed to hint at the delicate topic that easily, but the words were out and she started to feel a little bit of excitement, the good kind. Hiccup gave her a puzzled look.

She stood up and confidently stepped closer to him. Amazing what a good sleep can do to your shattered self-respect...

He looked deep into her eyes slowly understanding what she was up to. Oh, those eyes, bluer than the deepest seas; he felt he could drown in them.

"You know, we don't have to..." he started, but there was no turning back for Astrid.

"I know, but we're over this. I'm willing to do it. I want to do it," she claimed, lightly putting her arms on his bare shoulders. He didn't say anything, just took a deep breath still looking in those eyes.

Astrid stood on tiptoes and with her hands laced behind the back of his neck, she started to pull him closer. This time she never hesitated, just went for it. He tilted his head and put his hands on her waist just above the hem of her leggings. Her lips reached his.

They opened their mouths and their tongues started their slow waltz. It was only their second time, but they were immediately in sync. Astrid slowly pressed her body to his. Their sweaty skins melted together, giving a burning sensation to both of them. Hiccup slowly raised his hands and lightly started to caress her bare back, leaving a growing number of goose bumps on her skin. It was so...

A loud kick on the door made them depart suddenly. "Hiccup, get yer ass out 'ere and 'elp me!" shouted a well-known voice from outside the door. Without words, Astrid quickly grabbed the tunic from the floor and headed for the small back window.

The kicking became louder. "Swear to Thor, if ye fell asleep working, ye are going to regret it!" continued the annoyed voice.

Hiccup looked back at Astrid worryingly. She was already half in and half out of the window.

"Coming," he shouted back finally.

"Ye better be!" Came the angry answer.

On the way to the door he passed by the table.

Astrid's swords were lying there, neatly packed.

The headache came back.

#### 4. The Dragon and the Other Girl

**\*\*2 DAYS EARLIER\*\***

Stoick was standing on the deck of his longboat. He looked at the dangerous madman sitting right next to him on his chest that contained all of his belongings. As most Vikings, he didn't have much.

The chief looked at the scraggy, shivering scumbag with pure hatred, but swallowed his anger once again.

Had he been a 'regular' Viking warrior he would have cut him into pieces and fed him with the fish for attacking his only son, but being a tribal leader meant that he couldn't always do what he really wanted.

He must never let his anger take over him and sometimes it meant that he had to embrace decisions that weren't made in favor of him or his loved ones. The one thing that he loved about his boy the most was that much like his old man, he wasn't hot-headed either; he was thoughtful and caring and he was willing to sacrifice his own life for his people. These were the qualities of a good leader, so in that sense Hiccup was more than ready to take his place, yet on the other hand Stoick was still worried about his son not being able to protect himself.

He looked at Cess and shook his head. This man could have ended his son's life in a blink of an eye, even though he was aged and scrawny and supposedly imbecile. With a frown on his face Stoick looked up and saw the outlines of Outcast Island. He waved towards his men and two of his Vikings grabbed the old fool and his chest and put him in a boat. He didn't say a word, which was odd; Stoick expected some whining and crying, because that was what cowards usually did, but Cess was silent as a clam.

Once he was put on water he reached for the oars and started to row towards the bleak shores of Outcast Island. Stoick wasn't a vengeful person but he wished he'd die at sea before reaching land. Something just didn't feel right about this whole thing.

Maybe Thor would be kind enough to send a fatal lightning.

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After an hour of intense rowing, Cess reached the shore. He climbed out of the boat and carefully carried his chest up where the tide couldn't reach it; he had to secure the precious burden inside. Yes, yes, the secret he was hiding in the wooden box was a valuable one, he knew that. A wrinkly grin sat on his face when it came to his mind that Stoick's men had forgotten to check his luggage. It was a mistake, in all probability, a fatal one.

When the chest was safe in the sand, he smiled again. Mildew was right; he was the cleverest man Cess knew. He missed his old neighbor a lot, but he won't have to miss him any longer since the Berkians

marooned both of them on this desolate, dark island.

At first, Cess didn't understand why their plans would work out and he really didn't want to harm that blacksmith boy; he had no problems with him. But Mildew told him that if he had attacked him he would get a free ride to Outcast Island and as always, Mildew was right. He was on Outcast Island, even though he had never owned a boat, and he had the treasure with him; the thing his old neighbor was so excited about.

He carefully opened the chest, wanting to take a good look at its content once again. Mildew said that the scary looking giant of a man, who was the leader of the Outcasts, would be pleased if Cess gave him the precious thing he dug out in the cave. He said that the large chief would reward him plenty. He could be an Outcast warrior if he proves worthy and it was all Cess dreamed about.

He bent down and took out the sack cautiously. The oval thing inside was pulsating with a purple light; it shined through the rough fabric that covered it. Cess caressed it gently. It was the most treasured property he had ever owned, but now he was willing to trade it for armor and sword.

He looked up; the thick bushes were rattling around him, but he had no fear: he knew the Outcasts were coming for him and the gift he had brought them.

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"I never actually thought this could work," admitted Alvin, looking at the pulsating purple thing on the table. Mildew stepped closer; he, too, was mesmerized by the object in front of them. "I told you, Stoick would get rid of anybody who threatens that dumb son of his." He tried to touch the thing with a bony finger but Alvin slapped on his hand really hard. Mildew hissed at the sudden pain.

"Don't you dare to touch it; it's my ticket to get the dragon boy."

Mildew tried to keep it cool but it wasn't easy. "It's not like I could break it. The shell is an inch thick," he mumbled finally, clutching his hurt hand.

"From now on, nobody touches it but me. I want to make sure that once this thing hatches, it recognizes me and only me as its master," thundered Alvin, gazing in awe at the pulsating egg. He was almost hypnotized and it took him several minutes to be able to tear his eyes away from it.

"So, is it sure that no one in Berk knows about its existence? Not even the boy?"

"Yes. Cess never showed it to anyone but me."

"And how did you even know about it? I've never seen anything like that in the dragon book." Alvin had the book once and even though he couldn't make much use of it, he carefully examined the pages and remembered every species that were mentioned in the thick tome.

Mildew hesitated before answering the question. Knowing what 'reward' Cess had gotten, he wasn't sure he should share all his secrets with the unpredictable Outcast leader. For the time being, he decided on revealing as little as it was possible. He let go of his sore hand and cleared his throat.

"Not many people know this, but that book is not just a simple book; it's actually two books in one. The standard Viking runes are about the average dragons that are eh, basically grow on trees. But on every page there are secret runes too. They're invisible for the uninitiated; they look like scratches and dirt on the worn, old paper and the text can only be deciphered by the ones who can read them."

"Are you telling me, old man, that you can read them or what?" asked Alvin dubiously.

"No, I can't. But I know they are there; I've heard many stories about them when I was younger. There are dangerous dragon eggs all over this archipelago, sleeping and waiting peacefully, under the ground, hidden in caves, put away on the top of the steepest cliffs. Cess was lucky to bump into one while digging for Thor-knows-what in that cave and it was a clever idea that he showed it to me before anyone else learned about it, because I knew what I had to do."

"You brought it to me," thundered Alvin. As he said the word 'me', saliva shot out from his mouth, hitting Mildew's chin. He didn't dare to swipe it away. He cleared his throat again trying to get rid of the lump that was forming in it. He stepped aside, not wanting to get more drool on his face.

"And it's another lucky coincidence that I actually knew about this dragon. The purple color is rare, not to mention the flashing shell."

"If you are so sure of yourself, then tell me, when will it hatch?" Alvin didn't like the way the old man was talking to him. No, he didn't like him at all. He was sneaky and shifty and he didn't have an honest bone in his body. But as of now, Alvin needed him, so he kept the grizzled sinner by his side.

Mildew leaned closer to the egg, warily examining it with all-knowing eyes. "If it's pulsating this fast, it will hatch in no time. And the best thing about it is that it will grow into an adult in a couple of weeks."

"Good. I don't want to waste more time than necessary."

"He will be yours. Sooner than you think," said Mildew, trying to sound as confident as possible.

"Okay, then there's only one thing that needs to be solved." Alvin leaned closer to Mildew. He wanted to take a good look at him, looking for signs of cluelessness, insecurities. The way the old man was talking made it sound way too simple, but Alvin was cautious. He failed one too many times at executing his plans.

"Right..." Mildew's gaze remained fixed on the brute.

"How can I get the thing I need from that \_person\_?" Alvin emphasized the word 'person' with complete disgust. He couldn't help it; he felt sheer hatred for those who had tricked him...

"Don't you worry, Alvin, I know just the right man to solve our problem. He'll get what you want." He tried not to smile, but he knew if he played his cards right, he could bring a powerful ally into this whole ordeal. And he desperately needed someone who backs him up. Yes, Alvin was unpredictable and Mildew needed leverage; he might be old but he is no fool.

"I hope it's not some idiot again. I'm running out of free cells in my dungeon." Alvin didn't feel comfortable about the fact that he had to rely on someone who wasn't trustworthy, but he had his loyal soldiers. His island. And he was only a few days away from taming a powerful dragon.

"You shouldn't have locked away Cess, he is a harmless creature and he did a good service to you..."

"Yeah, and he almost killed that little worm in the forge. I told you, I needed him \_alive\_."

Mildew looked down on the ground knowing that Alvin had anger issues. He felt sorry for his old neighbor, but there was only so much he could do... Cess wasn't worth another word, he was a sad casualty of a hidden power struggle, and as of now, Mildew had to do everything to please the giant madman.

"So, who do you have for the job?"

"I have a nephew. He lives on an island close to Berk and I can assure you, he's willing to do anything for me. For us. He owes me his life. And I have a solid plan."

"Right. You can explain it to me while we're having dinner and then you can leave with a ship in the early hours of the evening."

"As you command, my chief."

The unexpected syrupy tone in the old man's voice surprised Alvin, he sounded way too confident for his liking. "And remember... If you tell anyone about this dragon, I'll kill you."

Mildew boldly decided on answering Alvin's threat with a sugar-coated threat. "I swore loyalty. But many people would kill for the legendary dragon that only hatches once in a hundred years. \_The Sniffer Puff\_."

"Hush now, enough with the gibberish, old fool. I cannot wait for this reptile to be hatched. Once it will grow big enough to serve its purpose, I'll crush the heart of the dragon boy and make him my slave." Alvin couldn't help but laughed up. The mental image of the dragon rider in chains almost made him jump with joy.

"I might just have a better idea," started Mildew, "there's a better targetâ€¦"

"Better than the boy?! Look old man, if you try to trick me or feed me with your non-sense, I'll kill you in a blink of an eye and we all

know that no one will shed a tear for you. It would be a rightful end to your pathetic life."

"Trust me Alvin, I know what I'm talking about!" He shared a new gossip and he then he shared an old rumor. It sounded incredible and ridiculous at first, but when Mildew got to the end of it, Alvin was sure that it really wasn't the dragon boy whom he needed the most.

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**\*\*NOW\*\***

"Coming, coming," said Hiccup firmly again, and he was glad that he unintentionally fastened the door with the latch earlier. He grabbed his tunic that was still lying on the floor only to notice that it wasn't his but Astrid's " she must have taken the wrong one when she hastily left. 'That might be a big problem,' he thought and didn't even try to put it on. He wasn't exactly what you call a beefy guy but Astrid was half his size. If only she wore baggier clothes...

In a last and desperate attempt to reduce the damage he tied the piece of clothing on his waist and went for the door.

"For Thor's sake, what took ye so long?" Gobber didn't exactly seem pleased when Hiccup finally managed to open the door. He pushed the boy back, while entering the forge with the huge sack of scrap metal he was holding. "It's heavy as Hel," he complained putting his hefty burden down, taking a good look at his apprentice. "What's with the strip show?" Gobber pointed at Hiccup's very naked chest.

"Erm... I was working and it's pretty hot in here."

"Luckily, no one had to see all of this," replied Gobber gesturing towards the boy's upper body again.

"Yeah. Right. No one saw it," Hiccup felt his cheeks turn crimson. For a second, he remembered how Astrid was pressed to him not two minutes ago... He shivered. It was a good thing she got out of the forge in time...

Gobber looked at him and shook his head in disbelief. Something was not right. He sniffed in the air as if he was a hunting dog. He didn't smell anything, of course, but when his eyes wandered back to the boy's disheveled hair and red cheeks, he was sure that something had happened in his shop... he just didn't know what. And he was not sure, he wanted to know it.

"What are these?" He asked when he discovered the neatly packed swords on the table.

"The swords of Mrs. Hofferson," answered Hiccup, trying to talk with as few words as possible, not wanting to give himself away that easily. He almost felt transparent in front of Gobber's eyes.

"And who brought them here?" Hiccup felt that his master's eyes were basically piercing through his skull. He averted his gaze.



"A-astrid." His voice cracked. He tried to conceal it with a series of clumsy coughs.

"Hot, eh?" said Gobber. Hiccup never reacted. "And who's gonna take them away?"

"I-I promised the Hoffersons that I'd bring them to their house tonight."

"Son, you know we don't do home deliveries." After a couple of seconds it seemed that Hiccup forgot to answer again; he was looking at his prosthetic as if he saw it for the first time.

"You're not very talkative tonight... Butâ€¦ I know you were up to no good. I feel it in my guts. I don't know what you did or \_who\_ you did it with..." Gobber noticed that the boy's lips twitched when he said 'who'. Poor Hiccup hated when he was interrogated, especially when the sleuth was such a cunning one.

"Son. You're officially busted." Gobber stepped uncomfortably close to him. Hiccup felt terribly guilty, even though he knew they hadn't done anything wrong. "I don't want to jump to hasty conclusions, but I think it has to do with a girl whose name you cannot say without turning red as a beet root."

Hiccup shook his head trying to deny the obvious.

"Son, I might look like an old fool, but once I was younger and I had my fair share of hiding under beds and in closets. Gods, once I jumped out of someone's window and landed on a huge pile of dung. Those were the days..." The blacksmith took a moment to cherish the golden memories.

Hiccup looked at him ruefully. "It's not like that..." he started but his Gobber cut in. "I'm not saying you shouldn't hmmm... experiment with certain things. I merely want to suggest that you mustn't take anything from her that you \_cannot\_ give back\_."

"Ookay. I... can assure you that I've no intention of doing that sort of things." The young man's answer sounded honest but Gobber looked at him and it was his turn to shake his head. Bloody kids, they grew up so fast, eh. "Go, take those stupid swords," he said finally.

Hiccup went to the table, grabbed the swords and headed for the door.

"Hiccup?"

"Yes?"

"Don't you want to dress up before going out?"

Hiccup turned red for the hundredth time this evening. "No, I'm fine like this, really."

"Yeah. Super fine, lunkhead," mumbled Gobber between his teeth. Gods, he liked the boy to death, but sometimes he was just freakin' irritating.

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After closing the forge's door behind himself, Hiccup immediately headed for the Hoffersons' house. He was particularly happy that the village was empty at this time of the night. He was looking for Astrid on the way to her house, because he was sure she didn't go home without the swords and her tunic, but she was nowhere to be seen.

10 minutes later he was right at her house, standing in the shadow of some bushes, trying to figure out what he should do. It wasn't the best idea to knock on the door of Mrs. Hofferson half-naked in the middle of the night, that was for sure.

If only he could... suddenly, two strong little hands grabbed him and yanked him among the thick shrubs.

"What took you so long?" Whispered Astrid sounding quite frustrated. She was wearing his tunic. Hiccup liked the sight.

"Sorry. Gobber was asking all sorts of questions and I..."

Astrid impatiently cut him off. "Could we switch clothes?"

"Yeah, of course." Hiccup leaned down and placed the swords on the ground. When he stood up, his jaw dropped. She has already taken off her tunic and was standing in front of him in her breast bindings.

It's not that he didn't see her like that half an hour ago, it was just... quite unexpected. Unexpectedly pretty. The light of the Moon painted her pale skin gold and her big eyes sapphire. She looked painfully stunning...

"Ouch," he groaned when a hard punch to his bare arm woke him up from the daydream.

"Stop staring, dork." Astrid threw his tunic to his chest. Hiccup put it on and handed hers back.

While arranging her hair, she cleared her throat.

"Sooo... is Heather coming to the party tomorrow?" She asked it in a casual manner, even though her heart sank every time her name came up. It's not that she had any personal problems with her, once Heather was freed from Alvin's dirty trap, she turned out to be a charming person, butâ€¦

And Astrid couldn't finish this sentence, she couldn't find the right words to describe her feelings. Heather was a 'but', that was all Astrid knew.

"Yeah, isn't it awesome?" Hiccup sounded enthusiastic. He really liked Heather; she was an amazing girl to have around. She had the brains, she had the charm, she had the wits, the whole 'good friend' package.

His gaze shifted to Astrid's face and he noticed the uncomfortable look in her eyes... It was not that she didn't like Heather, on the contrary, she was quite okay, but... was it her instinct to be

\_jealous\_? No, she couldn't have been jealous. Hiccup wasn't her boyfriend. They were just friends. Just friends.

She tried her best to conceal her feelings, but it was harder than she thought.

Hiccup cocked an eyebrow. He didn't really understand how girls worked, but he felt that Astrid was struggling. He wanted to say something nice to calm her suffering soul, but he had no idea what could work; as of now girls definitely belonged to the \_mystery class\_

He stepped closer to her. Her eyes were now fixed on the ground; she refused to look into his eyes. He touched her chin with two fingers and gently lifted her head. It worked. Finally her sapphire eyes were locked with his emerald ones.

"Astrid..." He started silently but stopped immediately. Words didn't come easy.

"Yes?" she asked, trembling, feeling that the closeness of him made her heart rate elevate.

"You know I wouldn't offer any other thing but my \_friendship\_ to Heather, right?" He said gently, his calloused fingers still holding her chin. She gave him a small, hesitant nod.

"Hiccup..." she started and felt that she was under a strange spell. The force that drew her to him seemed unbeatable. "I-I think we didn't have the chance to finish \_properly\_... what we have started back in the forge..." she finished with a nervous tremble.

Hiccup didn't say a word but moved his fingers away from her chin and cupped her face. His thumbs were caressing the sensitive skin behind the earlobes. It was really hard for Astrid to stay still standing. They were looking at each other for an eternity and let their eyes do the talking instead of their mouths.

Finally, Astrid stood on tiptoes and placed her hands on his wrists for leverage. Their lips met. She hesitated before slipping her tongue inside his mouth, but she received a warm welcome there. Once again she was amazed how soft and smooth everything felt.

They were up again in their own personal Valhalla... She tried to memorize everything, the way his fingers were moving on her skin, the tastes and the smells, how her calves started to hurt a bit, because she wasn't used to standing on tiptoes for long, long minutes.

But she had to finish with him eventually; her toes were cramping unbearably. She felt completely dizzy, so she moved closer to Hiccup and pressed herself to him for support.

He hugged her tightly his lips brushing her forehead. She didn't know why, but she started to feel nervous. Her heart was racing. She didn't want to stay there any longer, her uncontrollable feelings frightened her. She squeezed herself out of his hugging arms, leaned down for the swords and without saying a word, she ran to the door.

Hiccup felt half confused, half amused by her sudden exit. Is it

always going to be like this? Will she run away after every kiss? He had to smile. He promised himself that he wouldn't let her get away that easy next time.

§§§

Mildew was right. The egg hatched not long after it was delivered to Outcast Island. Alvin looked at the little purple creature squeaking in his hand. It was hard to believe that in a matter of days it would be as big as a grown man. He patted the tiny thing with a thumb. The miniature dragon grabbed it. He had to admit that his grip had already felt strong...

§§§

Astrid woke up early and excited. The memories of the night sweetened her soul and she decided that she'd be super nice to Heather. She felt a lot more confident about herself, especially after Hiccup told her on his own awkward way that he had no romantic feelings for the brunette girl.

On the other hand, he didn't say that he had any romantic feelings towards Astrid either, but... oh well, he didn't seem to hate all that kissing.

Whenever she remembered how they stood in the bushes the night before, she felt tingles all over her body. She hasn't decided yet whether she liked it or not, but when it happened, it felt natural. And no matter what she did, her thoughts kept on wandering back to him.

After quickly braiding her hair, she rushed out to her sleepy dragon and decided to fly higher and faster than ever before. At some point during her flight, from the corner of her eye, she saw a fast moving, dark spot on the sky, and it made her smile.

Someone else was out on an early flight, too.

An hour later, she decided to go home, have a quick breakfast and go out to the shore to wait for Heather's boat. She knew that she'd arrive early in the morning and she wanted to be there to greet her with the others, but once again her mother just had to ruin her plans...

Okay, it was partly her fault; she had completely forgotten that it was the wedding anniversary of her parents. Every year they went on a bear hunting trip and spent a couple of days together in the wilderness and her mother needed some help with the packing. Worst timing ever.

The sun was high up in the sky when she had the chance to leave, but she decided on finding Hiccup and Heather wherever they were.

§§§

Heather arrived early in the morning, as she had promised, and she was glad to see Hiccup waiting for her. He stood on the shore with his foot on the ground and his prosthetic up on a rock.

The warm morning breeze was playing with his chestnut hair. Even from a distance, Heather saw how much he had changed in the past year and she had to admit that Hiccup now was one of the most charming men she had ever had a chance to lay eyes on.

She felt that a well-known nice warm feeling was crawling up her spine " she couldn't help liking him.

"Boy, you look bigger every time we meet," she greeted him upon jumping out of the boat.

Hiccup laughed and stepped closer to hug her. "It's not that I get better food."

"I mean you look 'manlier' every time we meet. Swear to Thor, one day you'll look like someone who actually could be a chief."

"Thanks, Heather. Well, I don't think girls like to be complimented on their size, so I'll just say you look pretty, as always."

Heather blushed. "Thank you. Okay, so where are the rest of the gang?"

"I think it's too early for them. Although I thought I had seen Astrid in the morning, but I might have been mistaken. Or... I don't know, her mom is a bit difficult these days."

"Yeah, moms can be really difficult," she agreed, laughing but she bit her tongue when she noticed the sad look on Hiccup's face. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't..."

"Don't apologize. It's... been a long time ago. Besides, I have a really complicated dad, haven't I?" He joked trying to ease the awkwardness with lightly patting the girl's shoulder. "I'm really glad you are here," he added softly.

"Me too. So what are the big plans for today?"

"No big plans. Let's have breakfast first. Then we can go out for a walk or a fly. Or both. Nothing is written in stone. I think the party starts when the stars come up."

"It sounds amazingly simple."

"It does," said Hiccup with a grin on his face. He whistled for Toothless and the three of them flew back to the village.

Â§Â§Â§

After a having a lengthy breakfast in the Meade Hall with the others, Hiccup and Heather left when Snotlout's bragging about some newly developed muscles became unbearable. During their morning meal, Hiccup looked up whenever someone opened the grand door, as if he was waiting for someone to show up. His concerned expression made Heather curious; she couldn't wait to figure out what was exactly behind Hiccup's odd behavior.

After leaving the hall, Hiccup decided on walking to a nice shady grove with Heather, as the weather was still hot and humid. They had

an extraordinary summer this year, but the boy didn't mind it at all. He happened to like the unusual. Like the unlikely friendship of human and dragon... Or the tale of the scrawny little oaf who had turned into a village hero...

Their walk to the grove took 20 minutes, but it was worth the effort. The wild roses were in bloom and the bushes looked as if they were on fire with their blood orange colored flowers. Heather took a minute to marvel at them, their smell was intoxicating. Hiccup was right; it was really a breathtaking place.

Heather looked at him. She swallowed hard. Now that there were only the two of them, she finally decided on telling him the secret she wanted to share with him ever since she had left for the Island of Berk... Well, it wasn't really a secret; it was just so overwhelmingly hard. She looked at him, right into his eyes.

"Heather, are you all right?" He asked with a worried expression on his face; it was quite obvious that she wanted say or probably do something awkward.

"I am..." she started slowly, "I just wanted to tell you something that may or may not change our relationship." When she saw Hiccup's even more puzzled look, she giggled a little. "Don't worry. It's nothing disastrous. I'm just... I'm going to get married in a couple of weeks."

Hiccup's brain needed a few seconds to process the unexpected news.

"Good Gods," he started finally with a huge grin on his face, "This is awesome, Heather. Can I get a hug?"

"Sure," she said and stepped closer to his wide opened arms. He hugged him tight. "This is so amazing, Heather, really. You made me so happy."

"I'm glad," she said and got lost in those long and strong arms around her.

§§§

It wasn't hard to find the trace of Hiccup and Heather once Snot spat it out that they had gone to the grove. Truth to be told, that idiot Viking made Astrid a bit agitated, because she had to punch him in the stomach to learn where they had gone. As if it was a secret!

She didn't exactly know why, but she instinctively started to walk on tiptoes when she got closer to the wild rose bushes that bordered the spot. She was almost there when she noticed them.

They were hugging happily... she stopped and felt almost petrified. They seemed so joyful. She could hear their laughs.

She didn't know what to do. Should she just go there and interrupt their intimate moment? Or should she...? Well, eavesdropping was not her style, yet her legs took her closer to the bushes. She hid among the green leaves and the fiery flowers. She was close enough to hear them clearly. She waited there with bated breath. Finally Hiccup let

go of her...

"Okay, now you have to do the talking!" said Heather with a huge, encouraging smirk on her face.

"Me? What about?" Hiccup couldn't quite understand her.

"Blonde girls, probably?" said the brunette, playfully poking Hiccup's chest.

"What about them?" Hiccup felt that his cheeks started to burn. He really wanted to drop the subject...

"Well, what about them?" Asked back Heather not letting him to get away that easily...

"Oh... Well, she is a bit of a problem," he mumbled while looking down at the ground uncomfortably, immediately regretting his choice of words.

'Bit of a problem?!' Astrid was outraged; her hands started to shake with anger and that was the point when she decided she had already heard enough. She backed out from the bushes. When she was in a safe distance, she started to run as fast as she could.

She wanted to run out of this stupidly unfair world in which the boy she erm... fancied? liked? thought of her as a problem.

She wished she had brought her axe, she really felt like chopping up something.

Or someone.

## 5. Astrid and the Villain

**\*\*FYI: This chapter gets a bit violent at the end. But don't worry, everything will be fine. Eventually.\*\***

Â§Â§Â§

Heather didn't make it easier for him. She didn't react to what he has just said, waiting patiently for him to give some further explanation. Never knowing he has just hurt the girl he was talking about, Hiccup continued his speech.

"Okay, she is not the one causing any problems, my father is. Let's just say, I don't want him to think that I'mâ€| huhâ€| \_into someone\_, because... well, it would give him a good reason to force things on me that I'm not ready to do. Yet. I guess."

"But did something happen?" inquired Heather with a serious face.

"Things always happen..." answered Hiccup enigmatically and he combed through his disheveled hair as if he often did when he felt uncomfortable.

"Okay, Mr. Closelipped, I don't want to torture you any longer. You'll talk when you feel like it."

Hiccup nodded. "Shall we go back? Stupid as it may sound, I'm starting to get a little hungry."

"Yep," nodded Heather with a reluctant smile.

She wished the boy had talked a bit more about the girl, because she really liked both of them both as separate individuals and a couple. Her thoughts drifted to her fiancÃ©. She adored him, naturally. He was a great lad, trustworthy and kind, and they had every chance to have a perfect life together - yet their connection was nothing like the one between Hiccup and Astrid, it was clear to Heather as a glass of fresh water.

The brunette hoped that both Hiccup and Astrid knew how lucky they were for finding their perfect match.

Â§Â§Â§

Astrid ran as fast and as long as she could, but she ran out of breath and her legs started to cramp, so she had to stop eventually. She was panting for a while, bending her body forward, supporting herself with her palms on her knees. Luckily, the little intermezzo was enough for her to calm down and it prevented her from doing anything stupid.

Yet she felt a mixture of angst, anger and shame and it was a most horrible combination. She wanted to do something before going totally berserk. Still breathing heavily, she straightened herself and sheltered her eyes from the blinding light of the Sun by placing her hand above her eyebrow. She saw the sandy shore in the distance. It was crowded with people and boats of different sizes; the celebrators started to arrive for the fest.

When she spotted a lanky, blonde girl fiercely hitting a lanky, blonde boy among the people, Astrid immediately knew what she needed: Ruffnut.

It's not like she'd ever tell her what the real problem was, but Astrid felt that the goofy girl's company would distract her from all those miserable feelings she had.

When she arrived to the shore a good ten minutes later, Ruffnut was already talking to a guy Astrid has never seen before. He seemed to be quite okay; even a little bit handsomer than the average. He had a wavy, dark brown hair that reached below his ears, a decent face and when he started to grin about whatever Ruff was telling to him, Astrid could see that he also had the perfect smile.

She wasn't eager to meet someone new, but having no other choice, she still went to them. When she got closer, she it became quite obvious from Ruffnut's silly giggling that she was into her new acquaintance.

'Oh, she is so predictable', Astrid thought, but then again, she had to admit the lad seemed to be quite a charmer. At least Ruffnut had a taste in men, unlike her, who... oh, she didn't even want to think about him. Not him. Anyone, but him...

"Hey, Ruff."



"Oh, Astrid. I was looking for you."

"Had to help my mom in the morning. Then I uhâ€¦ felt like I need a run."

"Yeah, you're all sweaty. Hope, you don't stink, though." Astrid punched Ruffnut on her shoulder. Even though she didn't care what the stranger thought about her, Ruff really should learn her manners.

"Ouch. Swear to Thor, your punches get harder every time."

"Sorry to interrupt your tough girl talk," started the young man and Astrid took note of his comforting, baritone voice, "But I don't think we were properly introduced to each other."

"Oops, my bad..." Astrid quirked a brow when she heard Ruff's annoying ninny giggle again. "So, this is Astrid Hofferson, my besty. And the gentleman is Mr. Gunner Gunnarson from... which island was it?"

The handsome fellow shook Astrid's hand. His grip was firm enough to make the impression of a very determined person and being a tough girl herself, Astrid liked it in a man.

She could have compared this new guy to the one she had known all too well, but again, she forced herself to stop thinking about him. It went surprisingly easy as they continued the conversation and both girls quickly forgot about the fact that the dapper gentleman never answered Ruffnut's question about his home island.

Instead, he looked deep into Astrid's eyes and flaunted his irresistible smile once again. "Are you \_the\_ Fearless Astrid Hofferson?"

"I guess... I am?" Astrid was gobsmacked. She never thought she had a reputation outside of Berk.

"I've heard a lot about you. And you fly a Nadder, right? This is so awesome. Anyways, nice to meet you, call me Gunns, please."

"Nice to meet you too, Gunns. And yes... I fly a Nadder."

"Hey, I fly a Zippleback, that's even better than a Nadder," claimed Ruffnut, who started to feel a little bit left out...

"Oh, sorry, Ruffnut. Sure. I know Zipplebacks are exciting, but I've always had a thing for Nadders. They're majestic creatures." The guy looked into Astrid's eyes again and she could swear there was something hypnotizing in his gaze.

She started to feel a bit embarrassed, not because of his piercing, mahogany eyes, but it has just occurred to her that after running a couple of miles like a mad woman, she must've looked dirty and unkempt.

"Well, we could go for a ride, if you want to, I just need to go home and... put on some cleaner clothes."

"That'd be great. So meet you a little bit later at the Meade Hall? We were about to take a walk with Miss Thorston. Andâ€| yeah, thank you, Astrid."

"See you guys in a bit," said Astrid before quickly turning her back on them, heading for home with long strides.

Maybe that was all she needed, someone who distracted her thoughts from him.

And if that someone was as good looking as Gunner Gunnarson, it was all the better.

Â§Â§Â§

Hiccup didn't quite understand why he felt slightly nervous because of not seeing Astrid all day; sometimes when he was busy in the forge or she at her parents' house, they haven't met for days. Plus, his day with Heather was pleasant so far and the news about her forthcoming wedding made him cheerful and even proud.

He was also glad to go on a dragon ride with her, but when a Nadder flew by them with full speed, never even stopping for a 'hello', the slight nervousness turned into something more serious. Especially when he spotted that there were two riders on the blue dragon: a girl, whose long, blonde braid was swimming in the air, and a boy with dark, brown hair, whose arms were tightly laced around the girl's slender waist.

When the Sun started to go down, Astrid and Gunns rode back to Berk. She had to admit that he was a pleasant company. He seemed to be well-informed and witty and he really knew how to compliment in a moderate way that never made his kindness awkward or annoying.

Astrid considered herself a tough girl and she was very surprised to admit that she actually liked if a boy said something nice about her â€" probably because he was just too shy to compliment her properly. Of course, she knew it very well that he thought highly of her, but from time to time it would have been nice if he had said something about her arms being strong or her aim being very precise. But he never did. Unlike...unlike some other man.

When she arrived home, leaving her company for the ride at the Meade Hall, she sat down and enjoyed the silence for a while. It was nice to be alone. She was happy that her mom and dad went away and the house was all hers. It felt so grown up and being totally confused, she desperately needed that feeling right now.

After a couple of minutes, she decided to go up to her room and change into something nice. Well, nicer - she didn't own any fancy clothes, she never needed them, but she did have a red tunic that really went well with her pale complexion and blonde hair.

She knew that it'd anger Ruffnut; it seemed that she really did fancy that Gunns boy, but hey, sister, life isn't always fair. At least, it felt that hers wasn't.

Finally, to spice things up a little bit, she even decided on letting her hair down. She hardly ever did that, her long, untamed waterfall

of hair proved to be an obstacle most of the time, but one way or another, this gathering was starting to turn into something special, something more.

§§§

Hiccup and Heather arrived at the Meade Hall early. He didn't mind it at all; he wished to have a pint of mead to ease his unreasonable bad feelings. They got the alcohol and sat down at a sturdy table and for a time, an uncomfortable silence grew between them.

It wasn't Hiccup's fault, he tried to find comfort in everything that surrounded him, yet he had a very strong suspicion that something had happened - he just didn't know what " and it bugged him deeply. He knew he probably shouldn't think about her, but he wanted to have a minute to recall the last time they had talked...

Well" last time there wasn't much talking going on between them, and the thought of what they really had done, gave him the shivers. She was so close to him. He could literally feel every inch of her body; her warmth and her heartbeat...

And then she ran away. Should he apologize for hugging her? Did he break the rules with showing more affection after their 'business kissing' than he should have? He was clueless. He wanted to talk to her so badly... except how could he do that when she was nowhere to be found?

Heather looked at Hiccup. Something was clearly on his mind " and it was obvious that it was not a happy thought. She really felt sorry for him and she wished she could help his tormented soul.

She poked his shoulder lightly to grab his attention. He looked at her with a slightly frightened expression as if he was a deer, facing the hunter's arrow.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you."

"No, Heather, it's okay. I'm fine... I was just thinking about something that happened the other night."

"Was it a good thing?"

"The best... I mean it-it was... yes... it was okay."

Heather smiled when she saw the boy's face turning red and she was very glad that at least she could make him talk now.

"I see... did it involve someone I happen to know?"

"It... might" have. But"

"Does it help if I reveal it to you that we, girls, sometimes behave very oddly?"

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Like the first time my boy kissed me" I kicked him hard, which was stupid, because I happened to really like both him and the kiss."

Hiccup didn't react anything first, just started to play with his jug of mead, turning it left, turning it right, checking how much liquid was left in it.

He sighed deep, before continuing.

"She didn't kick me. She just... ran away."

"Was it the first...?"

Hiccup shook his head. "Nah. Second. Or... two-and-a-halfth. But she always does that."

Heather clearly felt that her friend was suffering and in need and she really wanted to ease his misery, but she wasn't sure how to do it.

"I don't even know how you can half-kiss someone," she said trying to lighten up the dark mood a bit, gently placing a hand on his forearm.

"We were... uhm, interrupted."

"Oh, okay..."

"And also... those were not \_real\_ kisses."

"Hiccup, it's getting weirder every time you add something to the story. \_Unreal half-kisses?\_"

"Yeah, I know, it sounds odd. Okay... so we made a bet and she lost it and... now she has to kiss me seven times." His face was burning. He still tried to avoid the eye contact with Heather, so he was stubbornly fixing his hands and the liquid in the jug.

The brunette started to laugh. Hiccup had to look at her now, but he didn't quite understand what was so funny about his anguish.

"What fools you are," she laughed into his face in a way that almost felt rude.

He cleared his throat and his eyes wandered back to his beer again. "I know. But it's going to be over soon, so... then everything will go back to normal."

"Oh, you wish!"

Hiccup really wanted to know why Heather was so skeptic about getting back to their pre-kisses lives, but in that exact moment, the two Thorston siblings and a dark-haired stranger stepped into the hall.

He suspiciously resembled the guy Hiccup had seen on the back of Stormfly.

Ruff and Tuff seemed pleased when they noticed Heather. They didn't hesitate for a minute, but snatched her away from Hiccup in an ill-bred manner.

Being left there all alone, the unknown guy sit down at his table. Hiccup took a good look at him before saying a quiet 'Hello' to him.

The guy offered him a hand to shake.

"Oh, hi. I'm Gunner Gunnarson. But you can call me Gunns."

"Hiccup Haddock. So, are you the friend of...?"

"Yes, sure, Ruff and Tuff. Awesome guys."

"So how do you know them?" Hiccup found it a bit suspicious that the nincompoop twins had acquaintances outside of Berk; it was so uncanny.

"You know, family... I've a cousin who married their second cousin. The usual."

"I see."

"Do you mind if I ask a question?" Gunns leaned a bit closer to Hiccup so no one could hear whatever he wanted to say.

"Sure. Sure. Go ahead."

"It might sound a bit random, but do you know Astrid Hofferson? Blonde girl, rides a Nadder."

"Sssure."

"Okay, sorry in advance, eh, I'm probably a bit too forward, but do you know if she has any significant other in her life?" The words floated from the handsome man's mouth with ease, but they made Hiccup's jaw drop.

"You mean a...?"

"Yeah, a boyfriend or a..."

Hiccup quickly shook his head. He raised his jug to his drying lips and drank the left-over mead with two huge gulps.

"Okay. It seems that I ran out of my... so if you don't mind I'll go... It was nice talking to you... Gunns."

He quickly stood up, but his legs felt wobbly and he nearly stumbled over the chair he had been sitting on. He wanted to get away as quickly as possible. This was so frustrating. Here was this guy, the dream of all Viking girls, with broad shoulders, tanned skin and dark hair, and an exceptional smile.

And then there was he. A clumsy oaf, who only had one foot, and was too afraid to tell the girl he liked that... that he liked her. Really. And the thing that started as a childish bet wasn't really a game for him anymore.

Well, as a matter of fact, he couldn't have informed her about these things earlier, as it was the first time he dared to admit the whole truth about his feelings to himself. And now the recognition that he

could be late with the big confession made his heart hurt in a way that was unknown to him up until now.

It has never occurred to him that he could lose her, that other suitors could turn up one day. He took her for granted, but now he understood it that the lack of his appreciation could have an outcome that was really uncalled for.

He somehow made his way to the mead barrels where the rest of the guys were standing. He quickly filled his empty jug with an oversized ladle and started to drink it with small, fast sips as if alcohol was the only remedy that could cure his aching soul.

"So you made friends with Gunns?" Inquired Tuff. He saw that there was something with Hiccup but he was too ignorant to really care.

Hiccup nodded, never letting the jug of the sweet honey wine leave his lips.

"He is quite a beguiler," added Ruffnut with a bitter tone. Hiccup quirked an eyebrow and made a weird face while wiping his mouth; when did Ruffnut expand her vocabulary?

"And here comes the deceptive friend," she added, fixing the entrance of the Hall.

"Hah, at least you didn't use the word 'harlot' this time. But hey, she's soâ€|" Tuffnut's choice of words was even more unsettling for Hiccup, but he didn't comment or ask, he just unwillingly turned his gaze towards the huge doors.

What he saw was easily the most beauteous thing he has ever seen in his life. Astrid. Astrid, who looked like the goddess who decided to visit the filthy mortals' scornful feast. She was standing in the doorway, free of her armor and weapon, wearing a stunning red tunic, that he had never seen before, her golden hair waving around her figure as she turned her head, looking for something. Or \_someone\_.

"She looks \_different\_! That was the word I was searching for," finished Tuffnut proudly. Hiccup's eyes sadly followed her as she walked to the tall, dark and handsome Gunner Gunnarson. At this point he thought it couldn't get any worse, but then the guy stood up and after chatting for a few seconds, he left the Hall with the golden girl.

Â§Â§Â§

"You're right, it does look beautiful," declared Gunns when they finally stopped a couple hundred meters away from the village, looking back at the giant torches that were lit up for the joyous occasion.

He looked at the girl, whose skin and hair were glowing in the light of the fires. She was gracefully standing right next to him. He had to admit that even though there were a lot of pretty girls on his island, they meant no competition for Astrid Hofferson.

But he didn't really want to absorbed in her beauty, he had a goal in

his mind and he wanted to reach it, no matter what he had to do for it. Her looks gave him an idea and after a moment of hesitation, he decided to try it.

"The only thing tonight that I find more beautiful is... " He leaned very close to Astrid; his lips were only inches away from hers, almost brushing her mouth.

She took a deep breath... before pushing him away.

"Look, Gunns. I'm afraid I have probably sent you the wrong message but I'm... interested in \_someone else\_."

"Oh, this is embarrassing, I'm so sorry. I mean, I took the liberty and asked a guy in the Hall about your relationship status, but he said you have no significant other."

"Who?" she said, sounding rather surprised.

"He had a fishy name... wait a minute... Cod? Oh, no, he was called \_Haddock\_."

Astrid felt that her heart started to race and her face was turning redder by the second. "No, he didn't... Okay, I'm sorry, but I have to go now."

Gunner Gunnarson looked after the girl who was many meters away now. He really hated when he didn't get what he wanted. And she had something he really needed.

Â§Â§Â§

Hiccup finished his third drink and was about to start his fourth one. He started to feel a little bit better - thanks to the level of alcohol in his bloodstream - but it was really hard not to think about her constantly...

But he had obligations; he was about to apologize to Heather for being the worst company this archipelago had ever witnessed.

Suddenly someone grabbed his wrist from behind and tugged at it with unmistakable violence. Annoyed, he twisted his body to see his ambusher - he was pretty sure it was one of the twins - but his eyes grew wide when he noticed Astrid. Being utterly occupied by his own misery, he never even noticed when she had returned.

"We need to talk." She didn't wait for him to say anything, but started to drag him out of the Meade Hall. He had no objection. When they were outside, she determinedly led him to the back of the building where they were away from all the lights and the prying eyes.

"Okay, what's the rush?" asked Hiccup, rubbing his wrist when she finally let go of his hand.

"I want to get over with it as soon as possible, so I can go home." She sounded angry and annoyed, but before the young Viking man had a chance to react, she grabbed the collar of his tunic and pulled him down to her lips.

She quickly forced her tongue into his dumbfounded mouth and started to move it around inside, almost violently. For a short second he considered pushing her away, but her rawness and the alcohol he had consumed made his blood boil.

It was for the very first time that he felt a savage, animal-like instinct. He wanted to own this woman. He wanted to have her. He wanted to conquer her. He wanted to claim her.

His passion sobered him up and he fought her tongue that weakened by every stroke of his own. He was soon reckless enough to cup her firm butt that wasn't finally hidden under a spiky skirt and he tried to pull her closer to himself. His bold action made her furious.

She pushed him away with full force and slapped him hard.

"Ouch, why would you do that?!" he asked angrily placing a palm on his face that was madly burning. Apparently, this wasn't enough for her. She started to punch his arm. "And that's what you get for calling me 'a problem'."

"Ouch. Would you stop that?!" complained Hiccup in a stern voice finding her sudden violence unnecessary. When she didn't stop with the punches, he grabbed both of her wrists and pushed them down next to her hips where he held them tight.

"I don't even know how or why you've heard that, but you should have listened to the whole thing before assuming that you are my problem. But you know what? I actually do have problems with you now, because I happen to hate all this aggression." At this point he realized that he was holding her wrists very tightly, so he let go of them and confusedly looked away from her.

"You know, I'm starting to think that this whole bet was the stupidest idea, ever. I feel muddled and unclear about everything and... it deeply disturbs me." When he finished, he looked up into her eyes, but their icy blueness made him feel uncomfortable.

"Not twenty minutes ago, Gunner used all his charm to seduce me. I feel stupid now that I left him for this." Her gesturing towards him left a bitter taste in his mouth.

"Yeah, probably it was your worst idea ever." He bent down and leaned closer to her face. "I've planned to take you on a night ride, just to show you how much I... appreciate your company. But think I'd rather go alone now."

"Brilliant idea," she replied, pushing him away, "I'm going to spend the night in the company of someone I happen to really like: myself. Have fun with the others, I'm going home." With that said, she turned her back and left.

Hiccup stood there for a few everlasting minutes, not knowing whether he should shout or cry. He ended up not doing either of them, but he decided on going back to the Hall to say goodbye to the others before returning home.

When he returned to the Hall, he noticed that even though he had the worst night of his life, the others seemingly had boatloads of fun.



He went back to the Thorston kids who stayed close to the mead barrels. He was offered a jug and after a moment of hesitation, he accepted it.

He took his time to look around, but couldn't see the person his eyes were searching for.

"Tuff, have you seen that guy, \_Gunns\_?" Hiccup asked, unsuccessfully trying to conceal his worries.

"Last time I saw him, he was with Astridâ€¦. Oh, do you think he might get lucky tonight? Astrid's parents are gone..." Tuffnut sounded amused by his own rude remark, but it only made everything worth, so much worth.

"I thought he was spending the night at your house."

"Nah, why would he?"

"He said you were friends, almost family."

"Yeah, we've only met him this morningâ€¦ But he is an awesome guy, isn't he?"

Hiccup wasn't sure about it and he found the whole situation alarmingly strange. He got used to the twins being a little stupid but they were not \_that\_ stupid, surely they wouldn't forget a close friend.

"Wait a minute... he said your cousins were married or something."

"Our cousins? Do we even have cousins, Ruff?" He said turning to his sister who was sitting on the top of an empty barrel, uncourtly giggling through their whole conversation.

Hiccup never listened to her answer; it was painfully clear now that whoever the guy was, he was up to no good. He was lying from the first minute he put his feet on Berk and he even tried to...

"Astrid!" He cried before rushing out of the door leaving the confused twins behind.

Â§Â§Â§

After leaving Hiccup behind the Hall, Astrid decided on taking a walk on the shore instead of going directly home. She needed to clear her head and she thought that the sound of the waves and the sand between her toes would probably calm her a bit.

When she arrived to the sandy beach she took off her boots and started to kick the sand under her feet. It was cold and scratchy, but it worked like a charm. For a moment, she tried not to think about anything at all and she succeeded in it now that her anger was pretty much gone and the feeling of regret wasn't fully developed in her yet.

She sighed deep. She looked at the water. There was a boat not very far from her. She entertained the idea of jumping in and sailing

away. She smiled. But then she noticed that there was someone at the boat... She saw a long shadow that was getting closer to her. It was dark so she couldn't see it clearly, but it was definitely a man and his silhouette looked familiar.

When he was only a couple of steps away she recognized him.

"Hi Gunns, I'm sorry, but could you just leave me alone? I'm not in the best of moods." She was almost begging and she was surprised how weak her voice sounded.

But, he didn't listen to her, he came closer, until he was only two or three steps away.

"Sorry, Astrid, I need to stay," he cleared his throat and stepped even closer to her. "Listen, we can do this the easy way or the hard..." He raised his right hand; the sharp light of the Moon was reflected by the blade of the dagger he was holding.

Astrid knew she was a good fighter, one of the bests on Berk, but she also knew that she could not fight a dagger with bare hands.

She tried not to look as frightened as she felt.

"What do you want, Gunnarson?"

"Take off your clothes," he ordered her and stabbed into the air with an oddly elegant move to put more emphasize on his words.

Astrid knew she had no choice. She took off her red tunic and held out to the guy. He hopped closer to her and quickly grabbed it from her trembling hand. She noticed that he was wearing gloves, which seemed odd on a summer night, but Astrid couldn't think coherently now. She felt completely naked even though she still had a couple layers of fabric on her.

She closed her eyes for a second trying to shut out the wicked world around her. She felt sad. Not because her situation was hopeless, she was well-aware of it, but because of how she had treated Hiccup right before she was ambushed by this fiendish alien.

'If nothing remained of me, but a memory, it should have been at least a nicer one,' Astrid thought with a heart-breaking sorrow.

She still refused to open her eyes, but she heard that the sand was crunching under her attacker's boots. Then she felt a sharp jolt pain in her temple and a warm flood of blood quickly running down her face when he hit her with the hilt of his dagger.

She was no longer in control of her body when she collapsed on the sand, and for her last remaining conscious seconds she was thinking about Hiccup, and him only.

## 6. The Closeness and the Distance

Her head hurt. Really bad.

That was the first thing she felt. She tried to open her eyes but they were as heavy as two iron doors... Finally, she managed to blink

a few times, but her vision was still blurry; she could only observe that she was in a dark place.

She tried to move her hands. The right seemed okay, but she couldn't raise the left, no matter how hard she tried â€" even though in her current state 'trying hard' wasn't really a thing she could accomplish. But still, something heavy was on her left wrist pinning it to the bed she was lying on.

She wondered whether she was tied down, but she ruled that out since the thing that held her hand captive felt soft and warm.

She tried to turn her head and open her eyes again, very, very slowly. The world around her still seemed pitch dark, but not completely, something was flickering. A candle maybe? Or an oil lamp? As her eyes started to get used to the darkness, she noticed that the place seemed oddly familiar...

Could this be her room?

Yes, it was definitely her room; she recognized the smell of the pelts on her bed. But why was she here? And more importantly, how did she get here? Her last memory was...

"Nooo!" She screamed and using all the force she had in her, she sat up.

The thing that held her hand came off of it and she heard a loud thud as if something had fallen off from her bed and ended up on the floor. Strangely enough, the 'thing' gave out a painful "Ouch" sound.

Now that she saw better, she tried to turn her head and twist her body a little to see what or who was the source of the noise. Slowly, her eyesight was getting back to normal and the 'thing' started to emerge from the floor. It had shaggy auburn hair and a heart-breakingly exhausted face that seemed groggy and surprised.

For a second, he looked at her with narrow eyes, in complete disbelief...

"Astrid? Astrid!" Shouted Hiccup joyfully when his foggy brain finally connected the dots together and he realized that she had actually woken up. He quickly â€" but attentively - climbed on the bed next to her and hugged her as tight that it almost felt painful.

"Water? Can I get some...?" She croaked into his ears. Her voice sounded very weak and he immediately jumped down from the bed and rushed to her bedside table on the other side and poured her a glass of water from a jar. She drank it with big gulps, then still being very weak, she let go of the empty glass, which landed on her lap and dropped back on her pillow.

"It's better now," she said but her voice still wasn't stronger than a quiet whisper. She faintly felt that the glass was taken away from her lap and her helper was moving around the room; his prosthetic leg gave out the familiar thumps whenever it touched the ground.

She closed her eyes for a minute, but when the noise died away, she opened them and turned her head a little. He was kneeling next to her bed, with eyes wide open, carefully examining her face with a lovingly worried expression.

She has never seen this deep fatigue on his face before; his eyes had big, dark circles around them and his longer than usual stubbles were the telltale signs of not having enough time to shave in the past couple of days. He was a slightly frightening sight to her.

She almost asked him what was wrong, but then she remembered that she was the one in bed, because... the memories started to come back, making her eyes twitch in pain... But she didn't want to talk about it, not yet. Everything was still comfortably vague and she wasn't sure that she could handle the truth, not now, not ever.

"My wrist hurts," she pouted and even though complaining was really not her thing, at least her voice was back to normal again. She managed to grab her left wrist with the right hand and started to rub her numb bones.

"Erm... sorry, I think I fell asleep holding your hand..." He blushed from forehead to toe and looked down on his fingers that were playing with the fur on a pelt, not far from her face.

"It's okay," said Astrid with a faint smile.

"I-I was just kneeling here and..."

"Hiccup. How long have I been lying here?"

"Two days."

"Gods..." she said with a painful groan. This sounded bad.

Hiccup sighed deep. "Sorry about that." His voice was barely audible at all.

She looked at his sad face and she decided that she has to know the truth, it would catch up with her, eventually.

"What happened...?" She started, but she knew it was unnecessary to finish the question.

Hiccup waited for a couple of seconds before answering.

"After our erm... quarrel, I went back to the Hall and then I... had a creepy feeling and I knew that I should look for you." At this point, not knowing what had happened to her exactly, Hiccup decided to leave out the part about the guy who may have hurt her... but even the thought of him made his fist clench. "I checked your house, but you weren't there... So I flew around the island with Toothless and... found you on the shore. Unconscious."

She was aware that he left out many details; she remembered what had happened before that dirtbag... Gods! He took her tunic and hit her on the head... She touched her forehead. She had a little bandage on it.

"Yeah. You have a scar on your head. It's not a big one, though..."

but you were bleeding."

"My head hurts."

"I'm sorry about that, too." He leaned closer to her and with a gentle finger he softly smoothed away her bangs from the bandage with a really unnecessary, but kind move.

"He hit me on the head..."

Hiccup sighed again. He didn't want to talk about it now; he only wanted to hold her tight and... tell her how he had thanked the Gods above a million times when he had found her in one piece. But he knew that they had to discuss it; she was eager to continue.

"Before that, he took my tunic..." She looked into his eyes, searching for the answers that she actually feared, but the emerald doors to his soul weren't helping this time...

"Yeah. You were..."

"Was that all he took?!" Astrid raised her voice agitatedly. She had to know it. She just had to, even if the answer was the worst possible option. Luckily, Hiccup quickly nodded, knowing exactly what made her sounding so worried.

"Yes. Other than that you were... fully dressed."

"Thank Thor," she whispered and reached for his hand. It felt cold now, but safe.

"Astrid... I think you should go back to sleep. It's the middle of the night and you've been through quite a lot, and..."

"Will you stay?" she asked weakly, not wanting to let go off his hand, probably ever again.

"Sure," he whispered with a warm smile and leaned in to place a small kiss just above her eyebrow, next to her bandage. "I wouldn't go away even if you wanted me to."

"Hiccup, you know you don't have to kneel on the floor," she said next, trying to move away from the edge of the bed.

"Oh, it's okay, I don't mind." His dumb politeness just seemed completely unnecessary at this point.

"Climb in, there's plenty of room for the both of us." She knew she wasn't the only one in the room who desperately needed a good night's sleep.

But he still hesitated. "It just doesn't feel right that..."

"Look, I'm too weak to punch you now, but don't be ridiculous. My parents went on a trip and I don't think either of us has the strength to do anything improper or stupid." She managed to scoot over finally and tugged at his hand that she was still holding. He surrendered and climbed into her bed, under the pelts, but stayed as far away from her as it was possible.

Astrid reached out for his elbow, trying to pull him closer. "If you sleep on the edge of the bed you will fall down," she said, sounding a bit annoyed. He knew he had no choice, so he obediently moved closer.

They laid on their sides, facing each other, now only a couple of inches apart.

"Do you still want to hold my hand while we are sleeping?" She asked with an innocent look on her face and moved her hand that lay between them. He nodded, reached down and laced his fingers with hers.

"Astrid, I'm so relieved that..."

She let go off his hand and placed a finger on his mouth to shush him. "I know. And don't you dare to ever tell me that you feel guilty. It wasn't your fault."

His lips curved to a faint little lopsided smile under her index finger. "Okay," he whispered while she took away the finger from his mouth to hold onto his hand again.

For some moments they were just locking gazes. In the dim light of the room, Astrid's eyes seemed unusually dark, almost black, but they were still captivatingly beautiful.

"So I've been lying here for two days?"

"Mhm."

"Then we missed one occasion," she said softly while her wandering thumb grazed his palm for a fraction of a second. No matter how tired he was, he immediately knew what she was talking about. On one hand, he wanted to tell her that it wasn't a big deal, but on the other, he just desperately wanted to be as close to her as it was humanly possible...

He closed his eyes for a second, trying to sort out the tangled thoughts in his mind. It wasn't helping that her thumb moved again...

"And the last one... I think I have to make up to you for that one."

His eyes were still closed, but he felt that she let go of his hand and her fingers were now gently stroking his arm just below his elbow. The tension he felt was almost unbearable. He slowly opened his eyes feeling that they were a bit watery. He looked at her. She was tired and worn out, but she was still glowing.

"Astrid..." he started, wanting to say something smart about doing the right thing, making the right choices and going back to sleep, but instead he found himself tilting his head and leaning to her, closing the little distance that was left between them.

His hungry lips touched hers and it was very hard for Hiccup not to be too fast or too tough at first, but eventually, she her trembling mouth welcomed him with equal appetite.

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"Hiccup! Hiccup!" He heard someone constantly calling his name from the distance. A few seconds later he realized that he was still half-asleep and...

He opened his eyes with a huge grin on his face; Astrid's long limbs were all over him. Meanwhile the voice was persistently calling his name. He quickly and gently freed himself from her tangled arms and legs, rushed to the window and popped his head out to see who the impatient visitor was.

Heather had to smile when Hiccup's disheveled hair and slightly confused face appeared in the upstairs window. He put a finger on his lips, indicating that there was someone near him he didn't want to wake up. Heather pointed at the door. The boy disappeared from the window. He went back to the sleeping Astrid and with two light fingers he stroked her face before going down to open the door to the brunette.

"Someone slept in late." Heather greeted him with a big hug.

"Yeah, I guess. Sorry about the closed door..."

"It's okay, Hiccup," she said while letting go of him. "So, how is she?"

"She woke up. In the middle of the night," he answered joyfully, while escorting her inside the Hofferson house.

"That's awesome news."

"Yeah, but she is sleeping right now."

"It's okay, I came to help you. Go, visit your dragon, he misses you."

"Oh."

"Go. I'll stay here. I won't leave her," promised Heather, trying to assure the hesitant boy that he had nothing to worry about.

"Are you sure? I mean, I'm sure your fiancÃ© misses you. You should have gone home long ago."

Heather shook her head. "It's alright to help out my friends. Besides, Fishlegs was kind enough to help me send an airmail."

"Okay then. I'll just go home, pat my poor dragon a little, change into something new and... I'll drop by the Meade Hall to get some food. I'm sure she'll be hungry..."

"She'll be alright," she promised again.

"I know," he nodded and carefully closed the door before heading for home.

It was almost noon when he got to the Meade Hall. It was full of hungry, chatting people, but when he appeared in the door, they subsided into silence. He couldn't care less, he just wanted to get

some food and go back to Astrid. Most likely she had already woken up and he felt the urge to be near her.

He went inside and started to look where the food was served when he felt that someone was poking his shoulder. He turned around and saw Snotlout and the twins.

"Oh, hi guys. I'm sorry for not even noticing you. It's been a tough couple of daysâ€¦" He was trying to explain the situation quickly, but even his ignorant peers noticed that there was a great concern behind the simple excuse.

"Is she alright?" Asked Ruffnut apprehensively.

"Alright? How could she ever be alright?" Interrupted Snotlout with a smartass tone in his voice.

"What are you talking about?" Inquired Hiccup, not quite understanding his cousin, which was by the way, old news, since Snotlout never really said anything that made sense at all.

"Gods, Hiccup, how can you be so unbelievably naive? She went to the shore to meet a guy and then you find her there butt naked and all messed up? I have bad news, baby boy. Ever dreamed about marrying her? Forget it. She's \_damaged goods\_ now, not suitable to be a wannabe chief's bride."

The Hall became dead silent. All eyes were fixed on them.

"Ooops, that was harsh, dude," said Ruffnut, shaking her head in disbelief.

"How could you be so despicable? How can you say that about her? Our friend?" Hissed Hiccup and pushed him away with both of his palms. He looked around trying to make eye contact with the rest of the people around him. "And you? Do you all believe the crap he is talking about?"

No one dared to say a word.

No one has ever seen the son of the chief this worked up.

"Right. Because none of this is true," he added in a stern voice. "Astrid is fine. Unfortunately, she was attacked two days ago, but I can assure everybody that she is fine and her attacker will get his rightful punishment. End of story."

With that said, he went to the tables, grabbed some fried chicken and left the hall.

"Tell her, I'll still marry her if her parents make a sensible offer!" Shouted Snotlout after him, but when Tuffnut punched his arm, he only whispered the rest of it to the twins, "I mean, she kind of has to marry someone now, doesn't she?"

**\*\*TWO DAYS EARLIER\*\***

He wasn't really happy about how things ended in Berk. He didn't mean to hit her that hard, but he had no other choice: he was on a mission which included getting a piece of clothing from her (as big as



possible) and making her quiet before she screams or makes any noise that could draw the attention of anybody in the immediate vicinity. He also knew that she was a fierce and qualified fighter so he didn't take any chances...

He was standing on the deck of the small escape boat he carefully hid near the rocky parts of the shore sailing fast away from the island in the rapidly strengthening wind, the telltale sign of the gathering storm. He wanted to reach the place he was heading for before Thor's thunders strike down.

He adjusted a bit on the sail and looked back at the shore. He saw the silhouette of her petit figure lying still on the sand, right where he left her. She seemed lifeless from the distance, but he really hoped there was nothing wrong with her " not because he was such a good Samaritan, but her premature death would mean the complete failure of the mission and that he didn't want. He was dedicated. He was even more dedicated than the one who had trusted him with this most evil task.

Plus, he had a plan of his own, a goal he wanted to reach, no matter what: he wanted the inheritance he was entitled to, he wanted justice for himself.

Suddenly, he saw a large shadow appear on the dark sky and it was quickly getting closer to the girl in the sand. He was roughly a mile away from the shore and although it was almost the middle of the night, his trained eyes quickly recognized the Night Fury that landed next to the unconscious girl.

Even though the storm was getting more and more violent, and it was either hailing or raining in the past half hour, the strong wind helped him to get to the other island quicker than he expected.

After anchoring the boat, he jumped out of it with a swift move, carefully holding up the sack that contained his precious loot. The shore was seemingly empty when he started to walk towards the big cliffs that emerged nearby, but he knew it was only a matter of time before someone noticed his presence.

He wasn't surprised at all when he was ambushed by three Outcast soldiers; he a cocky smile drew on his face when strong hands roughly grabbed and twisted his upper arms, making him unable to move or defend himself.

"Take me to your master," he said firmly with nothing but confidence in his voice.

Without saying a word, the third soldier went behind him and put a hood on him. He was pretty sure that it was the last occasion on this island that he was forced to wear blindfolds. He knew that with his wit and craft he would quickly earn the trust of the mighty Outcast leader " and the valuable gift he was still holding in his hand was a big plus too.

After walking for roughly fifteen minutes on slippery leaves, thick roots and sharp rocks they entered some place. Without his eyesight, he had to rely on his other senses. The place felt even damper and colder than the outside world, it felt as if they were inside a cave

or an underground dungeon.

They were walking carefully on a sloped path; the strong hands that were holding him never let the boy trip or fall on the uneven terrain. Five minutes later, his keepers let go off his arms and it seemed that he was left alone in the great unknown.

He tried to sniff a bit, but he couldn't smell anything apart from the stuffy air of the supposed cave. He was still holding his sack with a force that turned his fingernails white as if his life depended on it " well, most probably it did.

"You may take the hood off now. But only if you dare," said a strong voice, echoing through the tunnels of the enigmatic place.

He raised a hand and revealed his face, casually dropping the hood on the floor. He blinked a few times, because he couldn't see at all in the light of the torches after the long minutes of blindness, he hadn't volunteered for. They were definitely in some sort of a cave.

Finally, blurry became sharp and dark became somewhat lighter, and he saw the huge man standing a few steps away from him. He had never ever meet Alvin before, but he was 200 percent sure that it was the Outcast leader he was facing.

A couple of moments later he noticed another person partly hidden by the shadows. He knew that lanky figure all too well... It was his uncle, Mildew, the most despicable and low-down member of his family. He was nothing but a wrinkly old sack of cowardice, greed and failure and it really repelled him that they shared the same bloodline. Yet on the other hand, Gunns couldn't forget that this pitiful old man had come to their rescue in times of need and sorrow and without him, neither life nor this meeting could be possible and because of that, he was sure that he'd feel gratitude towards him had he known that feeling at all.

But they had one thing in common: they were both rotten to their bones; the only real question was which one of them would go to greater lengths to do the most evil things imaginable.

"You are quite the host," he said to the giant man sassily raising his chin up, not sounding even a slight bit nervous. "But let me show you that I'm even a better guest, I brought you a gift," and with a cheeky smile he hold out his hand with the sack in it.

Alvin didn't say anything, he hardly even moved just raised an eyebrow quietly.

"It's her tunic," he continued without hesitation. "I only touched it with gloved hands and I put it in a sack that has never been used before, as I was instructed."

Alvin still didn't make any sound but held out one of his gigantic palms towards him, but the disrespectful young man shook his head. "Not before I learn why you need it." With his palm still in the air, Alvin seemed a bit infuriated at first but he quickly burst into peals of laughter.

He was starting to like the rawness that reeked from the

juvenile.

**\*\*NOW\*\***

She woke up feeling the warm rays of the Sun caressing her face. Apparently, someone has left the curtains open and the shutters of her window too... She smiled at the thought of who that might have been... She opened her eyes and got to her elbows looking around in her room only to notice that her scatterbrained sleeping buddy has left her all alone. As her eyes shifted to the pillow lying next to hers, the faint impression of his head and a strand of auburn hair verified that last night didn't only exist in her vivid imagination.

She carefully pinched the hair with an index finger and a thumb lifting it closer to her eyes for a short observation. In a second or two, she started to feel awkward. It was so not like her, getting emotional over a tiny piece of shed fur as if it was some rare treasure. To avoid further embarrassment, she quickly blew it away towards the middle of the room.

She felt confident again when she decided that the subtle signs of his mere existence are no real reasons to be excited about... Sure, his company was most of the time entertaining, inspiring and comforting, and well... in the past couple of days - for the lack of better word - stimulating, but he was still... he was still Hiccup. Just a boy from her tribe. A man. A manboy probably? Still, she shouldn't be so worked up about him. At least, not right now. She had other things to do, like finding that...dirtbag who bashed her head. She just needs to find her armor and her shield and the biggest, sharpest axe in the village and then she could...

A series of muffled thumps from the downstairs kitchen dammed the flood of her revengeful thoughts. She sat up fast and unintentionally grinned at the idea of meeting the noise-maker. She quickly got on her feet; luckily, her dizziness and weakness were completely gone now after last night's refreshingly long and peaceful sleep. She arranged her clothes and hair, carefully avoiding touching the bandage on her forehead and headed for the stairs...

Only to find a long, black haired girl instead of the one person she was really looking forward to see. After a moment of pure surprise she hoped that Heather, who was in the middle of putting away the dishes in the Hofferson kitchen, didn't notice her baffled expression.

"Astrid! Thanks Thor!" The brunette was all over her in blink of an eye and even though Astrid wasn't a particularly cuddly person she happily took part in the passionate hugging.

"Hey Heather, it's nice to see you too," she said with an honest, delicate smile.

"Hiccup is going to be back soon, he just went to visit Toothless and grab some food from the Hall."

"It's alright," Astrid never wanted to sound like a needy person even though she hadn't eaten in the past couple of days, but the telltale grunts coming from her stomach upon hearing the word 'food' gave away her true feelings.

"Let me just give you some yak milk and biscuits," said Heather and quickly started to prepare the meal.

"I'm not ill."

"I know. You just... you've been through a lot in the past two days..." Heather stopped mid-sentence and quickly changed the subject when she saw the frown on Astrid's face. "You know what? I'm a little bit happy that we have a chance to talk, just the two of us. I sort of wanted to invite you to my... wedding."

"Oh," Astrid didn't even know how to react properly. This was unexpected, to say the least.

"Hey, don't you 'oh' me, it's going to be amazing! I happen to love my fiancÃ©." With a happy smile she put the biscuits and the mug of milk on the table. The blonde girl hesitantly sat down and started to eat far faster than she wanted to.

"It's two weeks from now. And you can bring someone with you."

"Like who?" She asked back, her mouth full with the dry biscuits.

"I don't know. Anyone. Maybe a certain tall, dorky and handsome guy, who goes out at night frantically looking for you when he feels you're in danger then spends the next two days holding you hand?"

Astrid jaw dropped. "How did you even know about the hand holding?"

"I didn't. I just assumed." With a cheerful wink, Heather put a fresh plate of biscuits in front of her.

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If only the door of the Hall hadn't been an impossibly big one, Hiccup would have totally slammed it after leaving. Infuriated by the cruel and unjust rumor Snotlout had just started to spread, he almost literally bumped into his father who was standing a couple yards away from the Meade Hall.

"Son?" he started with a worried tone. He immediately noticed that something was terribly wrong for he never saw Hiccup this upset before. He quickly stopped and looked into his dad's eyes, feeling that he was shaking with anger no matter how hard he tried to conceal it.

"Are you all right?"

"I-I am, I just need to... I need to go to Astrid's," he said, holding up the food he had in his hand as an excuse.

"Yeah. Astrid. I want to talk to you about Astrid."

"But I-I have to feed her," he said quickly, but he knew that no excuses worked in case of his father, not even the really good ones, let alone this lame thing that just came out of his mouth.

"Her parents are on the way to Berk, I've sent a search party for them yesterday. I think they're perfectly capable of serving her needs."

Yep, no excuses worked. Hiccup shook his head, feeling frustrated. He spotted a group of stray Terrible Terrors.

He threw the chicken in front of them. Sharp teeth quickly started to ravage it.

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The walk home was a silent one and by the time they reached to their house, Hiccup was absolutely sure that it was going to be one of those father-son talks he later wished never happened. Like the one they had when his father announced that he had to go to dragon training.

Of course he was a lot older now, but there was something in his father that still frightened Hiccup, making it impossible to deny the things he had asked for. The best way, he discovered, to avoid these uncomfortable chats and tasks, was to spend as much time away from his father as possible, but he very well knew that he wouldn't be able to do it until the end of times, especially since he was the next candidate for chiefdom.

When they entered their living room, Stoick gestured towards the chair. "Sit, son." Hiccup did it with a reluctant expression on his face. "Is this going to take long?" he asked in a small voice, feeling a bit nervous about what just might come up during the conversation.

"It totally depends on you," said the chief, sounding a bit more stern than intended.

"Okay. I am ready."

"So. Astrid..." he paused after saying her name out loud, looking at his boy's face. He couldn't read anything from his expressions, just that his green eyes seemed a bit darker than usually. The giant chief cleared his throat before continuing.

"Last time we were talking about her, you said you didn't want to marry her and she was just a friend of yours."

"Yes, but if you need me to get married, I'd gladly take her as my bride." His hasty utterance even left Hiccup flabbergasted.

Did he just...? No, he didn't... yeah, he actually did say it out loud.

Was this his instant reaction to her name now? Of course he was very well aware of the fact that their relationship changed big time in these past couple of days but still... he has never actually thought about marrying her or making any serious commitments, but probably it was because he never had the time to actually think about itâ€¦

His brain shouted at him that she was \_just\_ Astrid. An old friend. A pre-teenage crush. Whom he wanted to protect. Yeah, probably that was the reason why he said that. Being the wife of the wannabe chief

meant protection from basically anything. Or anyone.

Yet, on the other hand, his heart whispered that it was Astrid. The only one. Without whom he pretty much felt like a half-eaten apple. A dull sword. A night without a day.

He desperately wanted to be with her now. He desperately wanted her to make him feel a whole again like she always did, because now it felt that something was really broken...

Stoick looked at his son with unusual, sad eyes. He took a deep breath before shaking his head.

"No, son. I want the exact opposite of that. I want you to avoid her as much as possible. And I forbid you to spend any alone time with her."

## 7. The Rumors and the Allies

Mentally preparing for the now rather loved than loathed idea of an arranged wedding, Hiccup's jaw dropped when he heard his father's words.

"What?" he asked quietly, not being sure that he comprehended it correctly.

"Look, son, I know it's going to be hard, but I'm not in the position to be concerned about yer needs and yer needs only. I've a whole tribe to think about and each and every member of that tribe is equally important for me," explained the big man in a stern voice.

Hiccup looked at his father and thought about how he had never hated him during all those long years when his parenting efforts only meant tough love and harsh words. His father was right at that time; he was nothing but a disappointment, a pure excuse for a Viking, a shameful heir to the legacy of the noble Haddock clan. Hiccup didn't hate Stoick when he had denied him right before he fought the Red Death, he only felt a deep and indestructible sorrow, because he had failed his dad once again, probably for the millionth time.

But now it was different. It wasn't just about him, it was about someone else too and he simply couldn't accept his father's poor judgment. He knew that he hadn't done anything wrong and neither had Astrid. He cleared his throat and tried to sound as serious and self-assured as it was possible given the circumstances.

"Is it because of that impossible rumor my idiot cousin is spreading? You just as well know as I that nothing had happened to Astrid that night!"

"Son, I'm..."

"Please, for once in this life, would you listen to me? I went looking for her almost immediately after she had gone missing and then I brought her back to our house right away."

"I know son and I won't ever forget that sight: ye holding the poor girl in your arms, soaking wet in the pouring rain."

"But there was nothing wrong with her, you saw her too! Yes, she had a wound on her head and a piece of her clothing was missing, but you would have called for the healer if you..."

"Hiccup, a woman's purity is her most treasured value; it's fragile, and once it is broken there's no way to repair it..."

He couldn't believe the unthinkable thing his father was hinting at and he felt the urge to protect both Astrid and her reputation. "Then we should go to Gothi right away and ask her to examine Astrid or whatever they do in these casesâ€¦ Sorry dad, I'm not an expert, but there must be a solution that works for Astrid."

Stoick looked at his son. He looked at his face, at his shaggy auburn hair, his emerald eyes burning with passion for someone whom he so openly and deeply cared about. He knew that feeling all too well... He had felt that for someone a long, long time ago, but he rarely thought about it these days, it was too painful to remember.

He wished he could tell his son about all his concerns to make him understand that it wasn't just about his or Astrid's fate, but probably the whole island's. But he didn't want to burden him with the memory of a sad past or the prospect of an unsure future - at least not yet when he was in such a vulnerable age. In time Hiccup would learn about everything, one way or another, Stoick was sure about that, but he wanted to prolong the inevitable a bit longer. Because he cared about him.

"Son, it's not Snotlout's foul mouthing I'm worried about... It's ye\_,\_" he said finally with a heavy feelings.

"Me?" He looked at the giant father with wide eyes of surprise. He had absolutely no idea what his father was referring to, he hadn't done anything that... oh, yes, he had, they had, but how could he...?

"Nothing happens on this island without me hearing about it..."

Hiccup took a deep breath and wordlessly met his father's piercing gaze.

"How long has this relationship been going on?"

Hiccup's first instinct was to deny everything, but he was a terrible liar and he was very well aware of that. Plus, probably it was time to come clean. It was time to share his hidden emotions with someone - well, at least part of them.

He looked down at the massive table that was between him and his father and started to talk in a quiet but determined manner.

"I wouldn't exactly call it a relationship. We're just...\_experimenting\_. Well, sort of."

This was definitely the most awkward conversation he ever had with his father â€" or anyone else for that matter.

"Okay. How far did ye get with your, khm, experiments?"

"Dad... not far. We just... not far. Really."

Hiccup had no doubt that his face was redder than a ripe apple, but he was certain that a few more or less chaste kisses were not the end of the world. "Definitely not that far," he added a moment later.

Stoick stepped closer to his son and put one of his large hands on his shoulder.

"I trust ye son. But ye have to trust me too. Ye have to believe that I want to protect Astrid. Stupid and unjust as it is, but the rumors are spreading about her and that filthy bastard, and even I cannot stop them. There's one thing I can do, the thing I must do: search the whole archipelago for that disgusting creature. He needs to be punished for what he had done or intended to do, there's no question about it, but there are these other rumors that I'm more concerned about..."

Stoick hesitated for a second before continuing. "Ye two are the talk of the island as well," he said finally, giving some time for his son to process the news.

"I don't know how it's even possible. No one has ever seen us... We never did anything in public, I mean..."

"I know, son. And I don't blame ye or her. It's just... people notice things. They see that ye look at her as if she was the apple of yer eyes and they notice the smile that draws on Astrid's face every time she is near ye."

Hiccup closed his eyes and only opened them again when his father squeezed his shoulder in an unusually tender way.

"These are beautiful things, trust me son, I know it, but... the timing is not right. I hope ye're responsible enough to understand and accept that."

The young Viking felt that his father's hand had become an unbearably heavy on his shoulder. He wanted to shake it off and run away, far from all of this nonsense. He wanted to rush to Astrid to tell her that he didn't want to continue with this ridiculous "fake" kissing scheme anymore, but only because he so desperately wanted the real thing.

His feelings were real they deserved real kisses and he wanted to share it with her right away. He wanted to put the whole world in front of her feet plus his bleeding heart that was pumping so heavily behind his ribcage...

But he knew he had to respect his father's wishes, even if his reasons and concerns were much too vague. And he also knew that one questionable gossip was more than enough to ruin a girl's reputation and he didn't wish her to fight for the restoration of her good name for the rest of her days.

He didn't want her to suffer, he wanted to protect her from all the harm, and if protecting her meant that he had to stay away from her, then be it so.



"I want to start the search immediately," he said finally after a heavy sigh.

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**\*\*2 DAYS EARLIER\*\***

Alvin laughed hard for a good two minutes and his laughter was an unusually joyous one. It didn't happen often that someone impressed him with boldness and bravery, and it certainly put him in an elevated mood.

"Hahaha, you're my kind of scum," he said with a long-lasting smirk on his, "and because of that, you deserve some explanation, so listen carefully. I've always been interested in the wicked and unlawful ways of nature and all things beyond. So when I heard about this witch who lived far up North, on the Great Plains of Ice, I went looking for her. It was an impossible mission, since no one knew about her exact location, but after spending long weeks in the ice cold plains, I succeeded in finding her and she rewarded me with sharing her vast knowledge of the otherworldly magic. Let's just say that ever since I have talked to this witch, I became the enthusiastic collector of the personal items of the good people of Berk. I have a hatchet that once belonged to their mighty chief, a pair of gloves from his dorky son and a few scales from a mysterious black dragon. And now you brought a new item for my growing collection and I'm nothing but pleased."

The young man didn't say a word, but his grip tightened around the "treasure" he was still holding.

"And now I only need some basic ingredients; minerals, herbs and intestines of unfortunate animals and voilÃ , I'll be able to cast the most powerful spell known in this Earth and make them my humble slaves for the rest of their pathetic lives... That girl, you stole the tunic from, had fooled me once and let's just say it made me a bit unhappy. It's not like I'm a terrible loser and I don't like to hold a grudge, but... I want her to suffer. Just a little. For the rest of her life. And that's where the story ends."

Gunns was still looking at him with curious eyes, but from time to time his gaze fell upon his uncle as if he was trying to read clues from the old man's expressionless, wrinkly face.

Alvin continued his talk, still in a jovial manner.

"So that's why I needed that tunic so badly. I want to punish them for all the horrendous deeds they have done over the years. And since I honestly and carelessly revealed how important that thing is to me, I'll be generous with you: I let you name your price for it. You want gold? You can have as much as your boat can carry. Want weapons? Take our finest swords and bows. You want men? I can spare a few."

Alvin stepped a few steps closer to him and hold his big hand out expectantly. Gunners looked at it while apparently thinking about the price he might ask for, but a few moments later he started to grin and the smile quickly turned into a loud, candid laugh followed by clumsy claps, as he hit his palms together while he was still holding the sack in one hand.

"Thank you, oh, Alvin the Treacherous, lovely performance."

Alvin looked at him flabbergasted. For a moment he thought that the boy had lost his mind since no one had ever dared to treat him like that before.

"I don't need your gold or your weapons â€" or your graceless lies for that matter. My price for this tunic would be the truth and nothing but the truth. The real reason why you need this so desperately. Look, Alvin, I've been spending the past years looking for something that I believe you're searching as well. I've discovered and learnt things that could prove useful for both of us, and since I have this valuable knowledge, I want us to be equals. I don't want to be your servant. I want to be your ally."

Alvin shook his head in disbelief. He wanted to be angry at the bold young man, but for reasons unknown, he couldn't. "Son, I don't know what you are talking about. And even if I did, how should I know that you aren't bluffing? When fearing for his life, anyone would claim to be valuable. But I forgive you; I'm sure you're just mistaken and confused."

"Or am I? Undeniably, there are a lot of things I don't know about - at least not yet - but I happen to know that you have found a dragon from the hidden class."

Alvin tried to look calm, but both of them knew that somewhere inside he was fighting a vicious battle with his instincts that were constantly urging him to kill the boy immediately. But he didn't do anything apart from looking at Gunns, unsuccessfully trying to intimidate him with his sharp gaze.

After he had ended the tense staring contest, Alvin turned his back to Gunns and walked to Mildew who was still hiding under the shadows. He stepped close to him and in a blink of an eye he knocked the old man out with a merciless fist. "Stupid old blabbermouth," he grunted and kicked the unconscious man on the ground. "Take him away!"

While two of his soldiers collected the unfortunate Mildew, Alvin turned back to the young man. All of his moves radiated an unwanted uneasiness now.

"So what exactly do you want to know in exchange for that piece of clothing?"

Gunns smiled at him in an almost charming way. "Just one thing."

"Name it."

"The real reason why you want to kidnap Astrid Hofferson."

It took him awhile to give in, but truth be told, there was no point in being secretive at all; he could kill the cheeky young man whenever he wanted to. On the other hand, he started to think that the boy was worthy of knowing the truth; the baldness and courage he showed impressed the Outcasts' chief.

"Let's go somewhere more private," he suggested finally and led the

boy to a nearby chamber. After he closed the massive wooden door behind them, Gunns took the liberty to look around.

He was quite surprised by what he saw: the place was filled with scripts, parchments, quills and the walls were covered with sturdy shelves full of books. Who would have thought that Alvin was such a keen reader?

"Yes, I take my job very seriously," commented the brute with a modest smirk on his face when he noticed the puzzlement in the younger man's eyes. "Do sit down, please."

Gunns did as he was told and placed himself on a chair at a small table in the middle of the packed room. Alvin didn't sit next to him, but stepped closer and crossed his enormous arms in front of his chest.

"Okay, so why not the Haddock boy?" asked Gunns eagerly.

"A little impatient, aren't we? Yes, my original plan was to kidnap Stoick's son and take advantage of his knowledge of the dragons. With the help of my new dragonâ€¦ I guess, there's no point in denying that I have him, since your feeble-minded uncle has already spilled the beans about itâ€¦ So, it would have been a piece of cake, but... my person of interest has changed."

"How is the dragon doing?"

"He is growing. He is not adult-sized yet, but it's just a matter of days."

Gunns took a deep breath and he sounded oddly honest. "Ever since I was a little boy I wanted to know and understand the dragons. I knew there were plenty of them, but since our island was further away from the nest of the Red Death, it wasn't raided as often as Berk. It's hard to observe these creatures when only a few stray Terrible Terrors and Gronckles land on your isle. But I had done all I could do, I had learnt the Dragon Book by heart and..."

"This one?" asked Alvin while taking a huge volume from a shelf that was in hand. The tome landed on the table with a huge thud. Gunns opened the book and looked at it carefully while slowly turning a couple of pages.

"Yes, this is it. There are only a few original copies, like this one, and we were lucky enough to have one in our possession. It was given to our late chieftain by Stoick's father as a token of his good will after they had signed a treaty. There wasn't any information about the mysterious Night Furies, but other than that, it contained everything mankind had learnt about the dragons. Well, except for the Hidden class dragons... there's no book about them."

"How much do you know about Hidden Class?"

"Not much. No one really knows anything about them. There's a reason why they're called the Hidden class," said Gunns, trying to sound confident. "Well, obviously, there was the Red Death, one fine example of this secretive class, but other than it being a giant, ravenous and lethal reptile, no one knew anything about her, not even the Haddock boy. He got pretty close to the beast, that's for sure,

but instead of learning how to control her, he simply destroyed her."

"You know a lot Gunns, but you are wrong. There's a book about them. Actually, it's in the possession of the Haddock Clan - they just don't know about it."

Gunns looked at Alvin with doubtful eyes. He felt cheated; it was so painfully obvious that the big man was feeding him with crap again. Young Haddock couldn't have missed a book about dragons when it was right in front of him.

"Look Alvin, I'm kind of fed up with your lies, why don't..." he said, jumping on his feet, infuriated. Alvin stepped next to him, placed a huge hand on his shoulder and pushed him back on the chair almost gently.

"I am not lying. Far from it. Their dragon book happens to be very special. It is the only copy that has all the information about the Hidden Class dragons, but the information is only visible for the initiated viewer. When I was talking about the witch who lives far up North, well... it wasn't exactly a lie. But she is not a witch, she is a Rune Reader. And I couldn't find her."

"A Rune Reader? There's no point in it, I could read the runes when I was five." Gunns tried to sound confident again, even though he knew that the big hand that was still lying on his shoulder could crush his bones in a blink of an eye.

"Except the Rune Reader doesn't read the runes we use; she is a person who can comprehend the secret signs as well. There are faint little dots and lines in their Dragon Book that look like random scratches and stains, but they are not. It's a book within a book that contains all information about the Hidden Class - the deadliest, rarest dragons of all times. The Rune Reader can decipher these hidden words. If I controlled two or three of these dragons, I could not only crush Berk, but make the whole world drop to its knees in front of me. But most of these dragons don't yet exist; they are sleeping their endless dreams in their unseen eggs in secret places where their ancestors had hidden them, centuries ago, waiting to be found and hatched by someone."

It was an interesting tale, but the young man couldn't make heads or tails of it yet. "If these eggs are so well-concealed, no one will be able find them among the thousands of islands of the archipelago... And what about your dragon?"

"The locations of the eggs are also mentioned in the secret texts. And my dragon? It was nothing but a lucky accident that the imbecile neighbor of your uncle had found it - buried in the middle of a cave."

"Okay. Well, a couple of things are still unclear. You had the egg of a deadly dragon, it hatched, I assume, so why would you need Astrid then? Why don't you just plan a surprise attack on Berk with your badass dragon?"

The big man raised his hand from Gunns shoulder and lifted it up to his head, tousling his hair in a parental manner.

"Be patient, we'll get to it soon. Unfortunately, the dragon they have found is not a deadly one, far from it, but on the other hand, if you train it well, it serves you well. I'll show you what he is capable of, but as of now, it's not that important, because you want to know more about the runes and the girl, right?"

"Yes... I'd like to know more about the \_girl\_. And the runes, of course," confirmed the younger man, putting a strong emphasis on the word "girl", which didn't escape Alvin's attention.

"The easy part of my mission is to get the Haddock's Dragon Book. I have a secret ally living in Berk, he will easily replace their book with mine. With the confusion you have caused in the village, I don't think anyone would care to open the book in the next couple of weeks. I'm not saying it's a mission without risks, but it isn't impossible at all. Now, the hard part is the Rune Reader..."

"Whom you couldn't locate."

"Her exact location is the deepest secret, no one knows itâ€¦ Except for the next Reader. But let me just explain more carefully what a Rune Reader is. These people are the descendents of one of the oldest Viking tribes and they have been the keepers of the dragon secrets since the beginning of times. At any given time there's only one Rune Reader - a female offspring of that ancient tribe - who lives far away from the civilized lands in complete solitude, surrounded by dragons who protect her. She leads a quiet, lonely life and basically waits for the next aspiring Reader to find her. Then she teaches her trainee everything she knows and when there's nothing left to be told, the old Reader disappears, letting the new one take her place."

Alvin looked into the eyes of Gunns who was trying to understand all the things he has heard - it was a lot to take in. When he managed to put the pieces together, the young man's mouth fell open.

"Does this mean that...?"

Alvin smiled. "Yes, son, exactly. Astrid Hofferson is to be the next Reader."

Â§Â§Â§

**\*\*NOW\*\***

When her parents came back instead of Hiccup, Astrid immediately knew that something had gone wrong. It wasn't that she was unhappy to see her mum and dad, but she desperately craved the company of the lanky boy - it felt that his presence was the only thing that made her feel less anxious about all that had happened.

His hesitant arms around her made her dark dreams lighter and the throbbing fear in her veins quieter. The comfort of his warm breath on the back of her neck and the faint yet weirdly exciting touch of the scratchy stubbles of his chin were the two things she really, desperately missed now. But of course, she couldn't admit it to anyone, especially not her parents, so she just pressed her lips together and hugged her mother.

When she looked at her mother, she saw on her face that she wanted to

talk to her and her dad politely offered to escort Heather back to the chief's house to give the Hofferson women some privacy.

The blonde and the brunette had said goodbye to each other and before leaving the Hofferson home, Heather once again reminded Astrid that she was expected at her wedding.

Astrid really didn't feel like celebrating anytime soon, but she didn't want to hurt her friend, so she gently nodded and made a promise she didn't intend to keep. She knew she could come up with an acceptable excuse later.

When Heather and her dad left, her mother hugged her again then gently stroked the sensitive skin behind Astrid's left ear.

It was her mother's thing, she always did that when she wanted to calm and comfort her and Astrid often wondered how her mother had come up with such a peculiar move. Most parents just patted their kids head or kissed and hugged them when they were crying, but not her mother; she always went for her ear.

Astrid had always felt that her mom was kinder and more affectionate than the average Viking parent, but she thought it was due to the fact that she was her only child. But she had never liked her mother's over protective ways, she boldly rebelled against them every way she could, even if it had meant taking unnecessary risks. But now it was different, Astrid felt defeated and she didn't mind her mother's gentleness at all.

"Astrid, we need to talk," she started half-seriously, kindly taking her hand and leading her to their table. The girl unwillingly obeyed, but she felt she had to talk herself out of the situation as fast as possible. She had better things to do then listening to her mother's pointless worries.

"I know, I'm in trouble, but I..."

"No, Astrid, you're not. I've talked to the chief and... he'll arrange everything. He made a promise."

"Splendid news, mom, then if you'll excuse me, I need to go," said Astrid while trying to stand up, but her mother's strong fingers quickly laced around her wrist, not letting her escape that easy.

"Where do you want to go?"

"Erm.. I need to talk to someone... dragon business and all." The white lie made her blush ungracefully.

"Daughter, if you wanted to talk to the chief's son, you cannot do that. We've discussed it with Stoick and we all agreed that it's in your best interest to stay away from each other."

Astrid went pale.

"Why?" she asked quietly.

"We need to protect you," said her mother calmly and started to stroke her behind her ear again. "You are a good daughter Astrid, I

couldn't ask for a better one. And I know you like Hiccup..."

"No, I don't!" Astrid cut her off, but when she looked into her mother's eyes, she knew that there was no point in denying the obvious. "Okay, I might like him. A little. But he saved me, so I guess it's understandable..."

"Oh, dearheart, it is, but..."

"Why do I keep feeling that you are hiding something from me? Why do I keep feeling that there's a big secret, a huge mystery that no one wants to tell me about?" Her tone was a lot louder now, she didn't even try to conceal her growing anger.

"Astrid, calm down. I'll tell you everything you need to know when the time comes. But as of now, just please, avoid Hiccup. It's your best interest. It's his best interest. "

"Can I at least say hi to him when I see him?"

Her mother looked down on her daughter's hand she was still holding. When she didn't answer her question, Astrid quickly tugged her hand out from her mother's grip and rushed up to her bedroom.

She threw herself on her bed and wished she could cry, but it just wasn't her thing. So instead she started to punch the headboard of her bed until her knuckles started to bleed.

§§§

Hiccup was sitting at his table at the back of the forge. It was late at night and he had been busily working there for many lonely hours. He once again finished a drawing, but in the dim light of the candles it seemed rubbish, unrecognizable.

He lifted the paper up and slowly tore it apart. He was too tired to do it furiously, like he had done the first twenty times. The torn pieces fell on the huge, messy paper pile under his desk. Probably he was thinking too much of his artistic abilities... When it came to inanimate objects and inventions, he did a perfect job. He could draw fairly good dragons as well, but humans? He never drew them and it seemed that he could not put the features of a face that had burnt into his soul on paper. Yet, he had to do it, he just had to do it even if it took ten more hours and a hundred more failed attempts.

He had to draw the face of that bastard who had attacked Astrid. He had to draw the face so he could take the drawing to the islands of the archipelago until he found someone who recognized the picture and named the man.

But as of now, he was too tired and disappointed to continue with the burdening work.

Besides, he had another thing to do; something that was easier, because it didn't come from his anger but from his heart. He pulled a squeaky drawer out and took two dragon scales from it. One of them was black as the night sky, the other blue as the morning.

He stood up and went out to get the tools he needed.

Â§Â§Â§

\*\*2 DAYS AGO\*\*

"That would be him," said Alvin, like a proud father, while proudly patting the sleeping dragon's head. Gunns' jaw dropped, he had never seen anything like that before. The reptile was a size of a bear and he was peacefully slumbering in a curled up position in his vast cage on a bed of silky moss. He was sleeping innocently; his purple scales were glittering and pulsating in the dim light of the torches that lit the place.

"The \_Sniffer Puff\_," said the young man, carefully tasting its name on his lips.

"Yes, that's right," murmured Alvin, "and he is an amazing creature."

"Would you mind sharing a bit more about him? The name sounds impressive, but since I'm neither a rune nor a mind reader..."

"Well, he sniffs and puffs," answered Alvin hesitantly, not being particularly comfortable with the young man's demanding tone. "His nose is hyper-sensitive. You can teach him several scents and odors and he can smell them out from miles away."

"Okay, so basically you have a very fancy dog now?" asked the young man quickly. The color of the dragon's scales were mesmerizing.

"Almost exactly, but there's a lot more to him. He sniffs out stuff, he finds it, and brings it back to its master."

Gunns was thinking for a little while, but it didn't take him long to put two and two together. "So, that's why you needed Astrid's tunic, to have her scent."

"Exactly. That's why I wanted you to use gloves and a brand new sack, so the other scents wouldn't compromise hers." Alvin stopped the patting of his dreamy pet and now looked into the eyes of the boy.

"But that's not the trick, right? I mean if it grabs Astrid, she would surely fight him off or she would scream for help. I'm sorry, but I don't see why it's a better plan than just kidnapping her the old fashioned way."

"I don't want to sail near Berk, because a) they can easily spot an enemy ship and b) I don't want the Berkians to know that Astrid was kidnapped. I don't want Stoick's son to come to my island searching for her. I don't need him anymore, I don't want a fight. The only thing I need is the girl, because she is the key to the Rune Readers location. Oh, yeah, about the fighting and screaming: yes, she would fight, I bet, she is a feisty little one, but this amazing dragon has another unbelievable ability: it puffs."

"Meaning?"



"Well, he quietly sneaks upon his target and then he puffs out a gas that is so strong it immediately narcotizes anyone who inhales it. The victim faints, the dragon grabs him, and he takes it back to his dragon master."

"Wow. Just wow. This is really something," said Gunns, looking at the dragon with admiring eyes.

"Almost 'wow', I have a little problem with the whole plan. The Sniffer Puff can smell his target from a couple of miles, as I've said before, but not more than five. I cannot ride this dragon, he is not for riding, he can only carry people in his arms, but he can only carry one, his "victim". He keeps the person close to his body in a tight grip while flying away with him, and if he starts to come back to his senses, he puffs another gas cloud and makes him lose consciousness again. So the only way I can bring him closer to Astrid, if I sail close to the shores of Berk, but then again, they would immediately spot me and send the dragon riders on me."

The young man looked at him with cunning eyes. He was sure he knew the solution to the big man's problem.

"I think I can help you with that. I just need something in exchange."

Alvin looked at him and laughed loudly. "I've been trying to figure out something for weeks now, I seriously doubt that you could solve it that easily," he snapped his fingers uncomfortably close to the boy's eye, but he didn't even blink.

"What if I told you that two weeks from now Astrid is going to be on a different island, and the island's harbor will be so crowded with ships from all over the archipelago that no one would notice an uninvited boat?"

The Outcast leader didn't answer for a good couple of minutes, but looked at Gunns with narrow eyes. He was almost sure that not killing the young man was one of the best decisions of his life.

"What would you want in exchange?" he asked finally.

"Astrid. But only when you don't need her anymore."

## 8. The Surprises and the Lack of Tears

When the sun rose, painting on the rough island of Berk a pinkish orange color, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock III slowly stood up from his chair. He was terribly exhausted after having spent the whole night and the wee hours of the morning in his lonely room at the silent forge. He rubbed his fatigue-laced eyes with the heel of his hands and when his tired vision became somewhat clearer, he looked down at the two things in front of him.

One of them was a little velvet pouch, which he intended to send to someone whom he had genuinely and dearly missed in the past couple tormented days. It wasn't much, just a humble, silent confession of his feelings that he wanted to share before this certain person wrongfully assumed that he wasn't thinking about her constantly, from dusk till dawn, every day, every night.

The other thing was a drawing. A final and almost perfect portrait of a mysterious person, who had claimed that his name was Gunns Gunnerson. The young Haddock didn't know anything about him, apart from his name, which could have been fake -much like everything else about him. He lied to them, he deceived them, he caused nothing, but pain before he simply vanished into the thin air or - since he had no dragons to ride - into the vast seas.

Hiccup looked at the picture and felt a sudden rush of nausea churning his stomach; vile and coward was never his favorite combination. But the more he looked at the picture, the stranger it felt. The young man he had depicted seemed oddly familiar... Hiccup quirked an eyebrow and lifted the drawing up, closer to the light of the flickering candle on his desk.

The noble, narrow nose, the luscious lips and all other features of the face started to trigger an old memory. It was blurry and no matter how hard he tried to force his exhausted mind to recall the vague mementos of the past, he didn't succeed.

After another ten minutes of fruitless brain work, he shrugged and carefully slipped the drawing into the pocket of his fur vest. He finally decided on getting a few hours of dreamless sleep before searching for a Terrible Terror to airmail the little pouch. And after he had arranged the delivery, with the drawing in his hand, he and Toothless could finally start the search for the dirtbag on the surrounding islands.

He only hoped that someone would have valuable information about Astrid's enigmatic attacker.

Â§Â§Â§

When Astrid flew back home on the back of Stormfly, it was almost midnight. She felt overly tired after spending the whole day looking for her attacker on the islands near Berk, but it seemed that no one had ever heard about the charming young man, who seemed appealing at first glance but was rotten in the inside. But maybe the failure of the mission was all her fault, she couldn't describe him objectively, because of the sheer hatred she felt towards him.

In one village an old woman thought that she had seen the man described, but a short discussion with her revealed that she mistook the evildoer for the dragon rider boy, the son of Berk's mighty chief.

Astrid cried out loudly when she realized that the aged spinster had confused the beloved boy with that yakdung of a man. She cursed for a good couple of minutes before noticing just how frightened the innocent by-standers looked at her because of her sudden, uncontrolled outburst. That was the point when she decided on flying back to Berk, because she knew she couldn't think straight and it was dangerous.

But now she was home, worn-out and sad, both because of her unsuccessful mission and because she was forced to avoid the one she really wanted the most. Only because of some pointless rumors and assumptions that were far from being true. People and virtues simply sucked, she thought with a heavy heart when she sneaked up to her

bedroom, undisturbed - luckily her parents and their "Where have you been?" questions had gone to bed hours ago.

This strange, almost painful feeling in her heart was a new one. It has never occurred to Astrid Hofferson that the absence of someone could cause that much grief, but it did.

Upon entering her room, her gaze fell to her bed and she wondered how she would ever be able to sleep in it alone, now that she had learned just how much better it was when you shared your pillow with someone...

A moment later, a small scratch on her window's shutter woke her up from daydreaming. She went to the window and cautiously opened it, only to find a little Terrible Terror shivering in the cold night on her windowsill.

She lifted him up, caressing the little body, making the tiny reptile feel warmer. The Terror soon started to coo in her warm hands, nuzzling his nose to her palm. He was cute and finally a small smile drew on Astrid's face.

As she stroked her, she noticed that there was a thin leather cord tied around his neck with a small pouch attached to it. She carefully took his little late night visitor away from the window and closer to her desk where a small candle's light was offering some warmth.

She sat on her chair, tenderly placing the petit creature in her lap, meticulously removing the little package from his neck. She had no doubt about who the sender could have been, and even without knowing what the pouch contained, she felt touched. He cared about her and that was all that mattered.

After taking a deep breath to calm down her excitement, she undid the knot on the pouch and peeked inside. The tiny reptile was already fast asleep in her warm lap, drooling on her leggings, probably dreaming about a huge pile of fresh cod. Astrid attentively emptied the contents of the pouch on the tabletop.

It was a necklace, as discreet and elegant as possible, so it wouldn't disturb her much if she decided on wearing it. The chains were made from the finest silver and they held an oval pendant made from two dragon scales: a Night Fury's and a Deadly Nadder's. The two scales were somehow melted together, forming an unbreakable unit.

She held up the necklace in front of her eyes, marveling at it as the pendant was slowly rotating in the dim light. Suddenly she noticed that there was something written on one side and she carefully placed it on her palm, holding it closer to the light to be able to read it.

It was only a small, delicate engraving, one word that said more than a thousand.

"YOU"

Just that, nothing more. Just "You".

Her nose started to feel itchy and her eyes were heavy with unborn

tears. She sniffed and rubbed them before the teardrops had a chance to run down her cheeks. Because Viking girls never cried.

Â§Â§Â§

Hiccup hardly had any sleep during the next following days; he trudged into his bedroom late at night and woke up early every morning, not caring about being dead exhausted. With a detailed map of the archipelago in his pocket, he decided to search all the nearby islands for the puzzling attacker. His short nights were infested with all sorts of nightmares about Astrid being abducted or hurt, but he kept on with the chase, no matter what.

On the fifth morning, when he started to look like a mere shadow of his usually self, his father grabbed his shoulders right before he walked out of the door. He jumped a little, he had never even noticed that Stoick was in the room.

"Son, we must talk."

"Sorry, dad, I'm a little distracted." His father looked at him and he could see clearly even in the faded morning light that his son looked miserable. His heart sank in his giant chest.

"Never mind, Hiccup, we need to talk."

"O-okay," agreed the young Viking unwillingly, the last time they talked was the most painful conversation of his life.

"Son, I've just received the official invitation of Heather's wedding. Ye have to attend it, it's protocol, she is marrying a noble from the Bearcrusher Clan. Plus, if I am not mistaken, ye're close friends."

"Dad, I know she wants me there, and trust me, I wouldn't miss it if I..."

"The invitation is for ye and Astrid. And we don't really have a choice; as I've said before, it's protocol."

Hiccup's jaw dropped. What now? After all that preaching about their separation being the only proper solution to a made-up problem, which solution both he and Astrid obediently agreed to, his father wants them to take a trip together? He wants them at a wedding to represent the Hairy Hooligans?

It didn't make sense, but on the other hand, the possibility of being with Astrid made his heart beat twice faster. He tried to conceal his excitement and hoped he had a straight face, because he didn't want his father to know just how much she meant to him... But his father was well aware of the young love that had been budding right in front of his eyes ever since Hiccup had changed Berk's life for the better.

"Don't get yer hopes up, son, we still need to protect her reputation. So ye're taking Fishlegs too, as yer chaperone. I'll make sure that ye two won't have a questionable moment together."

Hiccup shrugged upon hearing the worse news, because he still thought

that this grey cloud definitely had a silver lining, Fishlegs' guard was still better than not being able to see each other at all.

"And now son, ye go back to sleep. Ye look like a drowned cat, ye cannot go to a protocol wedding and represent yer tribe looking like this."

"Dad, you have gestured to all of me," said Hiccup absently, suppressing a yawn. He really did need some more sleep.

"Go to bed. Now. I'm going to the Hoffersons, to notify them about the wedding.

Hiccup murmured back something even he couldn't understand. He went back to his bed and had a peaceful sleep, the first in days.

§§§

The journey to the Bearcrusher tribe's island, Nerwind, was a lengthy one; it took them almost 10 hours to get there. Naturally, Hiccup decided on riding the dragons instead of the traditional Viking way of traveling by sea. It was less comfortable, for granted, but shortened the journey a great deal and he had enough of the traditions, anyways.

It was a tiresome trip, but he didn't mind it at all. It was good to finally leave Berk and the dark shadows that were towering over him behind. Plus, even though the subservient Fishlegs took his chaperone duties very seriously and somehow always managed to stand or fly between them, Hiccup could at least exchange a few casual words and a couple of secret smiles with Astrid.

Both of them noticed how pale and worn out the other was, but every time they looked at each other, their eyes shone up with a hopeful brightness. They didn't need words or touches to communicate their feelings and they shamelessly kept on doing their mute play no matter how hard Fishlegs was trying to distract them after he had noticed the affectionate glances between them.

He didn't dare to leave them alone and during the first two stops he didn't even go to pee. Astrid found it amusing how the big guy sat on a rock with a contorted face and two legs tightly crossed when they stopped for lunch, but she gently poked his shoulder and pinky promised him that they could behave for 5 minutes. It was ridiculous, anyways, she didn't want to jump on Hiccup or anything, although a quick hug would have been nice...

Finally, Fishlegs gave in and ran towards the nearby bushes. She kept her promise and didn't step an inch closer to Hiccup, they just quietly held their gazes until Fish was done with his urgent business.

Hiccup wasn't mad at Fishlegs, he knew that the chubby boy was told to keep them apart at all costs, and neither him nor Astrid wanted to cause trouble. Yet, it wasn't their fault that they attracted each other so strongly like the different poles of magnets.

Then they were up in the air again, flying over the endless seas. They had almost reached the Isle of Nerwind when he looked back at

her for one last time. Her hair was messy from the flying and her cheeks were kissed red by the chilly wind yet she was still the most beautiful thing he had ever laid eyes on.

She noticed his adoring glance and offered him a blushed smile in return.

§§§

They arrived the night before the celebration and Astrid immediately got separated from the boys – Heather wanted her to help with the last preparations before the big day. She also wanted to learn how things were going on in Berk since she had left.

She was shocked to learn about the aftermath of the attack and hugged Astrid tight after she had told her the whole story. And then they talked about Hiccup and Heather noticed how Astrid's cheeks turned pink whenever she said his name out loud, and the brunette found it adorable. For granted, she was less charmed when Astrid told her about the rest - how they were now forced to have a chaperone with them all the time.

"Eh, this isn't right," the brown girl commented bitterly, "if there are two people who should always be together, it's you. You and Hiccup."

Astrid bit her lip and blushed again. "Well, we can't," she said weakly.

"Oh, come on, Astrid, a little rebellion couldn't hurt..."

Heather winked at her and gave her a reassuring smile. She had an idea.

§§§

The wedding was like any other wedding of nobles: there were plenty of people, plenty of food and even more mead. Hiccup couldn't really do anything with himself, he didn't know anybody from the clan and after a series of useless small talks, he tried to hide in one of the dark corners of the giant Hall where the crowds were patiently waiting for the celebration to begin.

Surprisingly enough, Fishlegs had company. After finishing the first tankard of mead of the day, he was brave enough to engage in a conversation with a group of young women, who were seemingly really interested in Meatlug's diet and the distance he could fly without stopping.

Hiccup smiled at his corpulent friend's success; even though he was a nuisance sometimes, Fishlegs was a good hearted, lovable young man and Hiccup only wished him the best.

Then he looked around, twisting his neck in every possible direction, but sadly, he couldn't spot the one he was so eagerly looking for. There were quite a few groups of young women in the Hall, but none of the ladies he saw had hair like liquid gold... He took a deep breath and tried to be patient.

Suddenly, he felt a light touch on his shoulder and when he turned,

he saw Heather standing in front of him in her wedding dress. Although the young man had eyes for one girl only, he had to admit that Heather was an exceptional woman. She was slender and delicate and the eggshell-colored dress she was wearing was a perfect match with her own colors. She had little flowers in her hair and a beautifully embroidered cape that loosely covered her shoulders.

"Wow, Heather, you look amazing," he said kindly and he really meant it. He opened his arms for a much needed friendly hug.

"Thank you, Hiccup, I'm very glad you could come. All of you. It's comforting to have some friends here. It's not very easy to marry into a tribe that you don't really know."

"I understand that," answered Hiccup with a hint of concern.

Heather smiled. "Ah, don't worry about me. I'm marrying someone whom I happen to really like. And I think it's all that matters."

"I guess..."

"Listen, I need you to do me a favor," continued Heather, pulling him away from the nearby people. "I left something in my room, on my bed. I need you to get it for me."

Hiccup couldn't really understand why she was asking him to do such an intimate thing, it sounded a bit improper to send a man to the bride's room and surely, she could have easily asked any of the young ladies in the Hall to do it for her. Yet, for some reason she asked him and Hiccup didn't want to refuse the girl on her wedding day.

"You know where the bride's room is?"

"Yeah, sure. In the house with all those beautiful flowers."

"Clever boy," she said gently patting his shoulder, "Yep, flowery house on the right, first room upstairs."

"Okay, and what am I looking for?"

"You'll know it when you see it," and with that, he left the confused young man.

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Hiccup had no problem finding the house, it was right next to the Hall. But he was still unsure about this whole enigmatic favor she had asked for and he would much rather had stayed in the Hall waiting for Astrid.

Luckily, no one noticed him when he entered the building and the house seemed to be empty. The whole situation was quite uncomfortable and he couldn't help feeling like an unwanted intruder when he started to walk up on the squeaky stairs.

When he reached the top, he saw the door on his right, and since it wasn't properly closed, he thought this might be the room he was looking for. He pushed the door and his eyes immediately found the

"thing" Heather had sent him for.

His heart almost jumped out from his chest, because sitting on the edge of the bed there was Astrid, more beautiful than ever before.

She immediately stood up when she heard that someone was entering the room, and the surprised look on her face was the telltale sign of her not being fully aware of Heather's little conspiracy. Hiccup only wasted a moment to take in what he saw: her golden ocean of her hair was let down, and she, too, had flowers in her hair, except hers were red. She was wearing a matching red dress, which was perfectly fitting her slim figure, emphasizing the delicate curves of her body.

He didn't want to lose precious time with gaping at her, so with two long strides, he was right in front of her. He reached out, gently placing his trembling hands on her thin waist pulling her close to himself.

"Astrid..." he whispered but she cut him off by lacing her fingers around the nape of his neck, pulling him down to her lips.

They slowly tasted each other at first, then their kiss deepened, it became ravenous, and the lack of air around their lust was almost suffocating.

Yet neither of them wanted to break apart.

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**\*\*17 YEARS EARLIER\*\***

It was one of the worst winters Berk has ever seen. It was snowing day after day, and the whole island was quickly covered by an almost 10-foot thick white blanket. The village seemed lifeless and motionless and even the tribe's mighty chief, Stoick the Vast, hadn't stuck his nose out from his warm house for the past two days. It would have been pointless, anyways, no one could get anywhere.

He spent his days in front of the fire, playing with his one-year-old son, little Hiccup. The chief often worried about his offspring since he seemed weaker and clumsier than his peers, but that was understandable, he was a far too early baby, plus they both had a very fresh and deep wound healing in their hearts: the little one's mother had been taken away by a gigantic beast only a couple of months ago.

He looked at his son now, who was trying to take his first, wobbly steps on a huge bearskin in front of the hearth. He wasn't really good at walking yet, but on the other hand, he could already say a few words, which was a rare thing for such a young child. Plus he was exceptionally talented when it came to playing with his wooden toy cubes. All in all, he was proud of the little chestnut-haired boy and if he had concentrated very hard, he could see the future warrior in the tiny body.

He could also see his lost wife, Valka, in the child and it comforted him - he had nothing else left for him in this life, but his son. And Gobber, the blacksmith, his best friend and confidant, who was



currently trying to prepare their dinner in the kitchen - more or less successfully by the smell of it.

The chief's thoughts were suddenly interrupted by a loud knock on the door. Whoever came to visit them, must have been deadly desperate or completely mad for leaving his shelter in this thorforsaken weather.

He stood up and went to open the door only to find a trembling, frostbitten Njal Hofferson on his threshold. He let him in and quickly closed the door to shut the gathering snowstorm out as fast as he could. Gobber curiously came out from the kitchen with a wooden spoon in his hand.

"Njal, how can I...?" started Stoick, but the blonde visitor cut him off.

"Ashild is gone," he panted nervously, "she is gone!"

"What do you mean she is gone?" Asked the chief while lifting up his son who had just crawled to his giant legs. Little Hiccup looked at Njal with a frightened face. He couldn't understand the situation, he only felt that something bad had happened.

"She did it. She took her, too."

"What?! She took Astrid with her? In this weather?"

"She told me she had to go and... I didn't think she was serious." Njal couldn't bear it any longer and burst into tears. Stoick stepped closer to him to hug the man who was as big as him if not bigger.

"Why is she so damned stubborn?" said the big Viking man in a muffled voice, still sobbing. Little Hiccup reached out to caress one of his long, blonde braids. It could have been a touching moment, but Stoick knew there was no time to waste. Ashild was a tough woman, but this weather was tougher than any of them and Astrid was just a baby, two months younger than his son. Leaving home in this weather basically meant suicide...

"Njal, we have to start the search immediately," said the chief quickly while he stepped to Gobber and put baby Hiccup in his arms. "Gobber, take care of Hiccup."

The blacksmith nodded and the baby shyly buried his face in his broad shoulder.

"I'll get the sledge ready," shouted Njal back and hurried out of the door.

Stoick put on his fur coat and took a last, worried look at Gobber. Even though he was willing to do anything he could, deep down in his heart, Stoick knew he would never see Ashild or little Astrid alive...

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"How was the journey?" inquired the elderly woman while she put some of the strong smelling spices into the soup she was cooking.

"Long and cold," answered Ashild Hofferson honestly, still shivering a little, even though she was sitting as close to the hearth as it was possible. With gentle eyes, she looked at the little bundle that lay next to her and she was relieved that baby Astrid was still sleeping peacefully.

Ashild looked back at the woman. "She didn't mind the ride at all," she added quietly.

"Unlike you, right?" asked back the woman cheekily. "I know, dear, I know, it's hard to accept that dragons can actually be useful. But trust me, they are the kindest creatures of this world. Well, most of them."

"Oh, it's not that..." said Ashild while she gladly accepted the bowl of warm broth from the elderly woman, "I trust you. And your dragons. And I know I had to come, it's just... Njal must be worried sick because of us. And I hope he won't do anything stupid..."

The woman gestured towards her with the ladle in her hand, it was time to feed their hungry stomachs. They ate undisturbed silence for a couple of minutes.

"Don't worry, dear, the whole process only takes 20 minutes and if you want to leave immediately, you'll be back on Berk at dawn," assured her the old woman and wiped her mouth with the back of her wrinkly hand.

"I hope he doesn't go out to look for us..."

"Why would he? The weather is terrible." Ashild looked at the woman, but she knew it would be a futile effort to try to explain the sacred marital bond to someone, who had been living a lonely life most of her adult years.

"He is just... I don't know. I am his wife and Astrid is his daughter..."

The older woman shrugged. "I don't know much about men. Or people, in general."

"But you know the dragons."

"I do."

Ashild looked back at her daughter again. She was so beautiful, her little, golden-haired Viking princess.

"Will it hurt her?" she asked anxiously while she handed her empty bowl to the older woman.

"Yes. A little. But she's a strong girl..."

"I know..."

"She won't remember it, she's just a baby. She'll be okay."

Ashild looked at the woman. She wanted to ask more questions, but she feared that the answers might frighten her, so she kept her mouth

shut.

"So, if you're ready... try to wake her up," said the woman while standing up from the hearth, "I'll get the needles."

Ashild lifted baby Astrid and hugged her. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath.

"I'm sorry, Astrid..." she mumbled into the baby's golden curls, "I'm sorry, dear..."

Ashild felt that tears were tickling her eyelids, but she swallowed back her pain. Because Viking girls never cried.

## 9. The Father and the Fog

**\*\*Oh, guys, thanks for the reviews, they make me want to finish this fic ten times faster :-)\*\***

**\*\*You can find me on tumblr (haddocksortails tumblr com), in case you need anything. \*\***

**\*\*Thanks and I hope you'll like this chap.\*\***

Every time he wanted to finish kissing her and left the soft lips to let both of them take a quick breath, the tender face, he cupped with his trembling fingers, pulled him back again. He leaned back only Thor knows how many times to the warm cheeks and the sparkling blue eyes to put his lips back on hers, where they belonged. But the minutes went by fast and they had obligations, a wedding to attend and a chaperon to please.

After the last time their lips crashed, he took the liberty to hold her for a few more seconds, his gentle thumbs gently stroking her beautiful face. He loved how the past couple of busy moments made her cheeks rosy and her lips swollen. It was an attractive sight, a most attractive one, and the fact that it wasn't the result of a stupid bet or some anger-fueled quarrel, but of true and solid feelings, only made it even more special.

Hi shifted his gaze to look at the opening of her dress. It showed a lot more skin than the tunics she usually wore, but it wasn't her smooth, freckled skin that caught his eyes. He lifted a hand and placed it gently on the necklace she was wearing.

"So you got it," he mumbled and brushed away a few stray pieces of hair that got tangled in the fine lace. The touch of his warm fingertips made her shiver. It was a new, intimate sensation for both him and her.

Astrid nodded. "It's beautiful," she whispered and she gently grabbed his hand and placed a quiet little kiss on his palm. "But why 'You'?"

A weak smile grew on his face. He lifted his free hand and buried his fingers in her golden locks, gently raking them, enjoying their volatile tranquility. "Ah, it's so... \_corny\_. Do you really want to know?"

He brought her head to his chest and felt her nod. He took a deep breath and the sweet scent of her hair filled his nostrils. It was intoxicating.

"Because YOU are the most beautiful being that has ever walked or flew on this Earth. YOU are my Sun, my Moon and all my stars and everything else beyond. YOU are my beginning and my end and everything in between. All of my sentences start and end with YOU."

After he had finished his little, uncomfortably sensitive speech, he was really surprised how flawlessly it all went. He said big words, he should have been at least a little frightened, but all he felt was great relief. There. He said it. He unveiled his soul for her.

Astrid stayed still for awhile after his candid confession. Yes, it might have sounded a little hackneyed, but it was perfect in its imperfection, just like him, and it was more than obvious for her now that this whole kissing and flirting thing was not a game anymore for either of them.

They had stronger feelings for each other, feelings that she had never asked for, but they were undeniably there. She wished she could say anything to him, even if it was a cliché, but she knew it all too well that as of now they neither had the time nor the chance to explore exchange sentiments. She collected herself and unwillingly pulled away from the one she wanted to be attached to. Now it was her time to hold his face in her hands and instead of telling him about her feelings, she kissed him again, warmly and gently, smiling into his mouth, into his soul, before they parted.

"We need to go back," she said in an almost emotionless tone, desperately trying to hide her sorrow, not wanting to cause any pain to Hiccup, because it was really unnecessary. "I don't want us to get into more trouble," she added while taking a deep breath, grabbing his hand, admiring the longish fingers that had hardly any chance to touch her.

They slowly walked down the stairs, hand in hand, heads in the clouds. When they reached the front door, he let go of her, not because he wanted to, but because he had to.

"I love you, Hiccup," she said quietly in their last private second before she stepped out from the house.

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They went back to the Bearcrusher tribe's Hall on separate ways, but the precaution turned out to be completely unnecessary. The ceremony had already started and Fishlegs was still surrounded by the curious women he was so eager to entertain.

Hiccup started to suspect that the women were also the part of Heather's clever plan and he knew he would never be able to pay the favor back - after all, she risked her good reputation on her own wedding day and she took the time to figure out and arrange a meeting for her beloved friends. And this was something.

Hiccup looked at Astrid who was standing a few meters away from him

among a group of young girls. He only saw part of her face, but he was happy to notice a small smile in the corner of her mouth. He entertained the thought that it was because of him.

When Heather and her bridegroom were finally pronounced man and wife and the cheering started, Hiccup suddenly felt that the previously hideous idea of getting married seemed like the only natural solution, the end where all the roads led. Except it seemed that their road was far bumpier than anyone else's. It was unfair, but now that she had said those words at the door, Hiccup knew that nothing could stop him, not his father, not his tribe, not any villains.

He wanted to get back to Berk as soon as it was possible and talk to his father to make him forget his stupid rules and ask for his blessings. He was willing to fight and strike as long as it was necessary.

His gaze shifted back to Astrid who was, too, looking at him. They shared a distant smile and she touched the pendant on her necklace.

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He never had the chance to get closer to her during the celebrations, because Fishlegs finally remembered what he had been signed up to, and stepped between them every time he wanted to get a little nearer to her. But on the other hand, as of now, even being in the same room with her felt like a blessing. At least they had a chance to share a couple mute, meaningful glances.

Late at night, when the wedding was over for the young couple, Hiccup went to Heather to hug her goodbye. "Thank you," he whispered into her ear and she gently kissed his cheek. "I wish you the best. Both of you," the young wife said kindly and she was happy that she was able to help them, but when she looked into Hiccup's eyes the deep agony she saw in them made her heart sink and only wished she could have done more.

A little later, after saying their final goodbyes, they left the Hall and headed back for the house they were to sleep in. It was a huge building at the far end of the village and there was a stable next to it where the dragons could peacefully rest before their long flight back to Berk. They checked on Meatlug, Stormfly and Toothless, but all three of them were in dragon dreamland, so they went back to the house. The boys were to sleep downstairs, Astrid got the upstairs room.

Hiccup stood at the stairs long after Astrid had disappeared, but Fishlegs woke him up from his daydreaming by tugging the sleeve of his tunic.

"Listen, Hiccup, I'm really sorry about it," he said and his words reflected nothing but pure sympathy. Even though he did what he had been told to do, he felt a growing uneasiness because of the ungrateful task he had undertaken.

"S'okay," answered Hiccup faintly and patted the shoulder of his bulky friend. "It's not your fault.

"No, I mean... I've been looking at you all night, of course, because

that's what my chief told me to do, but... you really do love each other."

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow. It was strange to have a conversation about his feelings, especially with Fishlegs, who never seemed to care about the matters of the heart.

He scratched his head before answering him. "You know, Fishlegs, it's a difficult question to answer. I think I've always liked her, but... in the past couple of weeks my feelings for her certainly deepened and, huh..."

"So you are not sure yet, are you?"

Hiccup hesitated for one moment before he answered the question. "No, I'm sure, I'm in love with her."

Fishlegs' jaw dropped. He certainly didn't expect such a determined answer, because people were usually so vague about these questions.

"You know, I could take longer pee breaks tomorrow..."

His offer made Hiccup smile. "That's okay, I'm sure we will be able to make up for all the lost time."

"Do-do you think you will marry her? One day?"

Hiccup waited a little again. It's not that the conversation was awkward or anything, but it was hard to say out loud the things that were only just forming in the back of his mind.

"I want to have a serious conversation about that with my father. When we get home."

"Oh."

"I don't feel 'oh' about it, honestly, it feels like the thing I want to do. I mean... Astrid has a saying in this matter, but... I do believe that we are on the same page."

Fishlegs bit his lip. There was one other thing he wanted to ask, but unlike Hiccup, he felt a bit embarrassed about it. "Aaaand what about Snotlout's...?"

"Fish, that's not true. I don't know why he had started it in the first place, I think he was just being stupid or jealous, but nothing had happened to Astrid, I can assure you. But... even if something had happened, I really wouldn't care about it."

"O-okay."

"Anyways, let's go to sleep. We'll have a long ride tomorrow."

They went to their room and judging from his light snores a minute later, Fishlegs fell asleep immediately. Hiccup however was lying in bed wide awake for a good while. Sleep didn't come easy, but not because he was sad or disappointed, he was simply excited about the next day. Finally, his lids became heavy. He had a dreamless night, but it wasn't an unpleasant one at all.

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Astrid woke up during the middle of the night to a rhythmical, constant knocking coming from her window. The room was dark, so as the outside world, so she couldn't figure out who or what made the noise, but the muffled beats just kept coming. It sounded as if someone was eagerly knocking on the shutters, desperately trying to get into the room.

"Hiccup?" She asked quietly in the darkness. No one has answered, but the knocking stopped for a moment then started again, this time a little louder.

She reached for her leggings and tunic that lay on a chest next to her bed and hastily put them on before stepping into her boots. Whoever made the noise outside was rather persistent.

She went to the window trying see through the cracks and holes of the shutters, but she couldn't see anything apart from the darkness. She wished she was home where she had her loyal axe under her pillow, but she had nothing here, no weapons to protect herself.

She hesitated before opening the shutters, but meeting the one who could have been reckless enough to visit her during the dead of night was tempting. Yet it was strange that he didn't say anything and it was strange that he didn't knock on her door. But on the other hand, it could have been because of Fishlegs - their compliant friend might have pulled his bed in front of the men's bedroom door to prevent any nocturnal activities between the two he was supposed to keep an eye on.

Suddenly, the noises ceased and the idea of missing the opportunity to see Hiccup made her careless. She grabbed the latch, lifted it and opened the shutters. She looked out from the window, but she couldn't see a thing; it seemed that the whole island was covered with a thick, white summer mist.

"Hiccup?" she called out again, this time a little braver, but again, no answer came. A bad feeling was forming in her guts and she knew that she should close the window and go back to bed. Or go downstairs to the boys. But then the strangest thing happened: the fog started to move towards her. It was also changing its color, the milky whiteness of the smoke became pinkish then purple while it filled her room.

The curious fog made her throat itch and she started to cough while trying to cover her nose and mouth by pressing them to the crook of her elbow. It wasn't working, she was choking and dry heaving soon. When a sudden feel of dizziness was taking over her, she tried to grab something close to her, but her fingers quickly slipped off from the wind sill she wanted to hold onto.

She was stumbling backwards as if she was drunk or wounded and the nausea she felt prevented her from screaming and shouting. She had never felt this sick in her life. She wanted to stop breathing, because she understood that it was the smoke that caused her agony, but it didn't help, it only made her weaker and lightheaded.

Her vision was blurry, but she noticed one last unusual thing before

collapsing on the floor. It was a pair of red dots, glowing amidst the thick purple smoke that had already completely filled up the room.

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She gained her consciousness back, but her brain was foggy and her body felt completely numb. She couldn't move, she couldn't think. She felt that her body was pressed to something warm and damp. The feeling was familiar. She felt the wind on her skin, she felt that the loose strands of her hair were tickling her face. She knew that she was flying, but it wasn't like any other time when she was in the air, because she wasn't riding on a dragon, she was pressed to one. She felt the scratch of talons through her tunic, next to her spine and she understood that the creature was holding her in its arms. Possibly, the same creature who came into her room and kidnapped her in the middle of the night.

She also perceived that she was above the seas. She could smell the salty water and feel the dampness on her skin. She tried to move her head a little, trying to get a better look at her captor. Something growled right above her head and then she heard a long hiss. The purple smoke came again, directly at her, the creature was blowing it into her face. Her lungs hurt and she started to cough and the outside world quickly disappeared again...

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The second time she came back to her senses she was lying on a hard floor. It felt uncomfortable, rough and wet. She was on her back and she couldn't move, but it was probably because of extraordinary fatigue that was numbing her limbs.

The floor was moving under her as if she was rocking in a giant cradle, so she figured she was on a ship. She could feel the gentle touch of the sun on her skin and although the claw marks still itched on her back, she couldn't sense the presence of the creature.

She tried to open her eyelids, she blinked a few times, but she couldn't see much, the rising sun was in her eyes. She moaned when she tried to move her arms, they hurt. Every inch of her body hurt. There was some movement around her. She heard footsteps and muffled, angry voices.

"... moved! She moved! Get the beast!"

She moaned again. "Water..." she tried to say with too heavy lips when she realized how thirsty she was. "Wat..."

A dark shadow crouched down next to her and reached under her neck. She was being lifted to a half-sitting position and someone poured water in her mouth. She gulped fast, but every swallow was painful, her throat stung terribly. When she had enough, she clumsily turned her head away from the flow of water and panted a few times.

"Beast! Get the beast!" said someone again and she heard the sound of heavy thuds.

And then the smoke came and hid everything again...



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Stoick walked into his son's room. He didn't want to spy on him, of course, he wasn't a nosy parent unless it seemed to be necessary. He just genuinely missed Hiccup and the idea of visiting his private hideout seemed comforting. He felt a deep regret because of all the things he had said or done in the past couple of weeks. He felt sorry for his son and Astrid, too. She was a good lass and he should have protected her or at least punish Snotlout for whatever shitty rumors he was spreading about her.

They deserved a better chief, a better father. Maybe a better \_future father-in-law\_... That idea sounded weird, because, eh... they were just kids. Well, not exactly "just kids", they were on the brink of adulthood and they had every right to care for each other. Stoick had no doubt that his son's feelings for Astrid were solid and solemn. He had always had eyes for the girl, which was quite understandable, since Astrid was undeniably the most beautiful girl in the whole of Berk. Maybe she was a little rough and feisty, but she was a true Viking lady and the chief couldn't have asked for a better match for his son. But what was even more important than her qualities was the fact that she seemed quite fond of Hiccupâ€¦|

Stoick took a deep breath. He knew how important it was for a chief to have a wife, a partner, a confidant, someone who can help him. Someone who backs him up and supports him through thick and thin. And he also knew what true love felt like. He knew that his late wife would have been the biggest fan of Astrid and Hiccup and she wouldn't have let anyone to tear them apart.

Hiccup was a good boy and he deserved the support and the whole truth, nothing else, but the truth. He was smart, gifted and responsible beyond belief. He had all the qualities and even more that made a good chief and Stoick was sure that one day his son would be the best leader in Viking history. He had already proved himself and done incredible things, he defeated a gargantuan enemy and he brought peace to Berk. He was the offspring all fathers dreamed about and Stoick was proud to call him his son.

Yet the burly father refused to share the sad memories of the past with him. He was overprotective in a way he probably shouldn't have been, but he wanted to keep his son safe. Not just him, Astrid too, and on top of that, he had a whole tribe to think about...

The chief stepped closer to his son's table, glancing at the various parchments that were lying around. They were blueprints only Hiccup's exceptional brain could understand, and thinking about this, made Stoick even prouder. As he stood there at the table, he noticed that there was one piece of paper on the floor and he bent down to pick it up.

When he righted himself, he looked at the drawing he was holding in his hand. It was peculiar, it was different, it wasn't a blueprint of a mysterious weapon or machine, it wasn't one of his brilliant inventions. It was a portrait of a young man and he looked oddly familiar...

Stoick carefully examined it, lifting the drawing closer to his eyes.

The man on the picture was young. He had dark, wavy hair and smooth features, features that Stoick recognized almost immediately. Yes, he definitely knew this person, he was sure of that, even though he hadn't seen him in the past couple of years.

The brawny chief had a bad feeling. His son wasn't supposed to know the person he had drawn the picture of, and it was very unlikely that Hiccup had accidentally depicted someone from the hard past...

Stoick placed the paper back on the table taking one last look at it. He knew he had to talk to his son, it was probably time to come clean before disaster happens. He was a large and brave man, however there was one thing, he couldn't fight: insanity. Insane people were unpredictable and dangerous and had no doubt that the young man on the picture had all these qualities.

Stoick knew he was from bad blood and was raised to take vengeance. He had to talk to Hiccup immediately.

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"Yep, I'm sure she can't hear or see us, but she's definitely alive and kicking. She's just lost consciousness again," said the soldier who was kneeling next to Astrid, checking her pulse.

"The dragon did his job," thundered Alvin while he was patting the reptile that was peacefully slumbering in a curled up position. "Now it is your turn," he continued, turning to the young man who was standing next to him.

"Are you sure she knows where the Rune Reader lives?" asked Gunns scratching his neck looking down at the young woman at their feet. She didn't look good. Her hair was messy and tangled and she had huge, dark circles under her eyes. Yet he wanted her no matter what. He had spent his whole life waiting for the best opportunity and the past few months had proven that she was the best opportunity. He remembered seeing her kiss Hiccup after the little shrimp had defeated the Green Death, and he from that moment, he knew he had to keep an eye on her, because she was important for the boy.

Yes, he spied on them, he saw them together and he came up with a million plans in his head. And then Mildew made an offer. It was tempting, because it made things easier and now Alvin owed him and Gunns wanted him to pay his debt when the time came. It seemed that this time had already come and he only needed to help Alvin one last time. And then he could have her.

Alvin thought that the young man did it because of the dragons, he had no idea of his ulterior motives, no one had, and it was good this way, it was safer. Of course, young Gunns wanted to know more about the dragons, he wanted to master them, but that was just an added bonus, the real deal was her.

The Outcast leader cleared his throat. "Mildew thinks she knows it. She has to know something. She has to know the location. It's her job to find the reader, it's her destiny," said Alvin with a frown. The young man didn't comment, so the Outcast continued. "Trust me, if anyone else on Berk had any clue about it, I would know it by now. I have my sources, I have my methods."

"Mmm, okay," said Gunns with a sigh, "then let's continue with our plans."

"Are you absolutely sure?" asked the mighty man with a hint of worry. "If you want to be credible, my men will have to be tough with you.."

"I don't really care about pain," said the younger man and stepped closer to him.

Alvin examined his face. He saw no fear and that made him both uncomfortable and suspicious. The reasons behind the young man's dedication to complete their mission were unknown to him and it was disturbing. But as of now, their cooperation was working smoothly, so he decided not to worry about the 'what ifs'. Plus, young Gunns gave him a better prospective. Of course, Alvin could have tortured the girl to make her spill the beans about the Reader's location, but he didn't mind trying a craftier way to make her speak.

They had time to try both methods, because no one knew who kidnapped Astrid, thanks to the Sniffer Puff.

"So? I'm ready, if you are," said Gunns. Surprisingly, it seemed that he was the one who was more comfortable with the thing that was about to happen.

The Outcast leader looked at him, but Gunns didn't even blink an eye. Alvin didn't hesitate any longer, he raised his enormous fist and punched the young man, breaking the skin above his eyebrow. The wound started to bleed heavily and the boy collapsed next to the unconscious Astrid.

"Tie them up. Both of them." Alvin ordered his soldiers and he turned away while the Outcasts were roping them up. He had mixed feelings about the whole situation, he wasn't particularly happy about hitting Gunns. It was strange since he had never had any problems with being violent, it was his nature. He fought quite a struggle deep inside, but he didn't show it, the world didn't have to know it.

But still, he was confused. He didn't know why he cared about the young man, but he did.

## 10. The Search and the Wounds

**\*\*Aaand 75 per cent of this chapter is brand new. I hope you'll like it.\*\***

After suppressing the tenth yawn, Fishlegs felt he should apologize from the dragons. But his sleepiness was quite understandable: it was still basically dawn and he was the farthest thing from an early rider. That was why he was so surprised when he arrived at the stable first; he could have sworn that both Hiccup and Astrid would be here when he turned up.

At least Hiccup should have been with the dragons, because where else could he have gone? When Fishlegs woke up, their room was empty, but there was nothing unusual about it, he knew that Hiccup liked to wake up early and go for a ride before the day started. Except... he

wasn't here and Toothless was.

For a moment it crossed his mind that Astrid and Hiccup had gone behind his back and could be engaged in an early morning tryst somewhere, but then he shook his head. "He wouldn't do that to me," he whispered to Meatlug, who was hungrily munching on a smaller boulder. "No, Hiccup would never compromise a friend."

Fishlegs looked at the other two dragons. Toothless was quietly curled up, waiting for his master, but he kept an eye on the chubby boy. Fishlegs loved Meatlug to death but the intelligence in the Night Fury's eyes always impressed him. There was no question that Toothless was the first among equals.

Stormfly however... Well, she looked strange. It's not that she was the calmest of the dragons, but this morning she seemed even more... Disturbed? Agitated? Worried? Something was definitely wrong with her. Fishlegs scooted over to the Nadder to pat her a little even though he was deathly afraid of the spikes.

"There, there, beautiful lady. I'm sure Astrid is going to be here in no time. She wouldn't miss your breakfast," he said while he gently and cautiously stroked the blue dragon. Suddenly, both of them jerked their heads up when they heard the noises of approaching footsteps. Fishlegs let out a sigh of relief when he saw the familiar, auburn head poking around the door. The sight of Hiccup was always comforting and Fishlegs hoped that they can leave soon now. He longed for a lengthy slumber in his own, comfortable bed and perhaps for a good dinner or two, before and after.

After saying a hasty "Hi", Hiccup rushed to check Toothless's saddle. "Sorry, I had to take care of some business." He didn't feel the urge to tell Fishlegs that he had a meeting with a woman who sold gemstones and yeahâ€¦ he might have bought an alluring zircon...

The whole idea sounded ridiculously romantic, but the gem was almost as perfectly blue as the eyes of the certain lady he intended to surprise with the stone. Well, not with the stone itself, he was planning on embedding it into a piece of jewelry. Of course, there was no rush, but it felt good that he had made a decision and it felt reassuring when he touched the pouch with the stone in his pocket.

"Where's Astrid?" he asked casually while fiddling with the straps of the saddle.

"I-I don't know... I kind of thought she was with...you?" answered Fishlegs and he started to feel that a lump was forming in his throat. Something just wasn't right. She should have been here by now...

Hiccup turned to him, looking surprised. "No, I haven't seen her since last night. We agreed to meet here at dawn... Are you sure you haven't seen her?"

"Not since last night," he nodded. Stormfly screeched. Fishlegs gulped hard. "Something is wrong with the Nadder, she is so... restless."

"Check the Hall, I'll check her room. Meet you at the town square in

10," shouted Hiccup while running out of the door.

Two minutes later, he was running upstairs, shouting her name, but no answer came. He found the door closed, so he knocked on it nervously, but again, no one answered his calls. He took a deep breath and opened the door. He found the room empty. Her bed was unmade, but it was obvious that she had slept in it. Her elegant red dress from last night was neatly placed on a chair, but he couldn't see the clothes she wore during their travel or her boots.

He noticed that the window shutters were open and it was a bit strange, because last night wasn't particularly warm, but other than that, nothing seemed suspicious, except... there was a faint, unusual smell in the room he couldn't recognize. It was a bit sweet, like the scent of a flower, but there were no flowers in her room or anywhere near the house.

He took another look around, but apart from the smell and the open shutters he couldn't spot any irregularities, so he decided on going back to Fishlegs. He really hoped that she was in the Hall, probably getting some food for their travels or doing some other innocent thing, like talking with someone...

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Fishlegs arrived at the Hall sweating and panting. He felt so uneasy about the whole situation and he ran to the building in record time. He went inside and found a few people there, having breakfast, but he couldn't see Astrid. He didn't know what to do, he was debating asking around, but he remembered that Hiccup had told him to meet at the town square, so he hurried out from the Hall.

Luckily, the square was only a few meters away from the building, so he wasn't late. He was a little worried when he found the place empty, but a moment later, he spotted Hiccup running towards him. He was alone, which wasn't the best news...

"Her huh, room was, huh, empty," panted Hiccup when he arrived.

"And she isn't in the Hall," he said to Hiccup while his lanky friend was still gasping for some much needed air. "I couldn't... I couldn't find her," Fishlegs mumbled and tears of panic were forming in his eyes when he saw the sudden jolt of pain that contorted his friend's face. He couldn't handle these situations well, he hated when something was not right, he hated when he presumed that someone was in danger.

Hiccup patted his shoulder. "It's okay, Fishlegs. We shall ask around. She couldn't have vanished into thin air."

It calmed him down a little. He trusted Hiccup. He knew that he was special, much like his dragon. He always solved everything, he always found the way out even from the most hopeless situations. Hiccup suggested going back to the Hall first, but unfortunately it soon turned out that no one had seen the pretty Hooligan girl that morning.

They went back to the house and visited the stable again then decided to fly around the island on the back of their dragons. Poor Stormfly was extremely agitated, much like Fishlegs himself, as it was clearer

and clearer with every passing minute that something had happened to Astrid...

Hiccup was constantly shouting her name, but their search ended with absolutely no result.

They went back to the Hall. The chief of the tribe and the young married couple were already there, the news of Astrid's disappearance travelled fast in the village. The chief - a much respected elderly man - was already organizing a search party and told Hiccup that his men would check every inch of the island for her. He had already sent for the port master and promised to look into every ship near the island.

Heather and her husband offered their help too and Hiccup really appreciated it. He tried to force himself to calm down, because he knew that nervousness only led to mistakes, but it wasn't easy. The hours had gone by quickly and the night had fallen on them and there was still no sign of Astrid.

He didn't know what to do. It started to become highly unlikely that Astrid was still on the island, but where could she be then? No ships had left between midnight and the time he had discovered that she was missing, plus all the ships were accounted for, and the port master hadn't seen anything unusual during and after the wedding night. And she couldn't have left the island on the back of a dragon, because they had all three of them in the stable.

Hiccup went to the Hall one last time that night to meet the members of the search party. Everyone looked extremely exhausted, but none of them had any new information. Hiccup thanked them for their kind efforts and everyone had agreed on continuing the search early next morning.

He and Heather stayed a little longer and Heather made sure he ate something.

"I'm really sorry. We completely ruined your wedding," he said quietly while munching on a piece of bread that didn't feel good at all.

"Nonsense," she objected and placed a small bowl of steamy broth in front of him. He grimaced when he smelled the food.

"Hiccup, you need to eat. You need more energy," she said worriedly and raked through his auburn hair.

"I know, it's just..."

He couldn't continue, all the tension that had been building up in him through the day suddenly hit the surface. He couldn't help it, he burst into tears.

Heather sat down on a chair next to him.

"I'm so-sorry," he sobbed feeling smaller than a Terrible Terror's toenail. "It's really... I shouldn't... It's not helping..."

She gently drew him into her arms. "It's okay, don't worry about it," she said while stroking his hair with light fingers.

Â§Â§Â§

Damp. Cold. Rough. These were the first things she felt. She tried to open her eyes, but everything seemed blurry. Foggy. Dark. She coughed. It hurt. Her lungs hurt. She remembered the strange, purple smoke that was suffocating her... She remembered that something had come into her room, an unknown creature, and it kidnapped her. She remembered the flight, the smell of the sea, the ship...

She remembered she couldn't move. And then there were the shadows, the silhouettes of the unknown men. The distant noises and the familiar smoke...

She coughed again. She was lying on her back, but this time the floor under her was even harder and colder, but she couldn't feel the sun on her skin. She blinked a few times and she started to see better, but the place was dark and unfamiliar. She moved her little finger. It worked. And then the rest of her fingers. She gathered all her strength and with a heavy groan, she propped herself up on her elbows.

She was in a dungeon. The cell was quite big, but there was not much light apart from a torch that was flickering on an outside wall. The metal bars seemed sturdy, unbreakable and she spotted a morbidly big padlock on the cell door.

She sat up and got up on all fours. She waited a second, but she couldn't hear a thing, so she carefully started to crawl towards the door. It was unlikely that the padlock had been left open, but she had to give it a try.

She reached the door and was about to touch the lock when she heard the noise. She froze with her right arm in the air. And then she heard it again. Something was scratching the floor behind her. She cautiously turned her head. Something was moving in the corner, but she couldn't see a thing, the light of the torch didn't reach the corner, it was completely dark.

She stood up slowly. She felt a little dizzy, but her pains were at least more or less gone.

She heard some panting and a muffled groan. It sounded human, which was good news, it felt safer, probably, because she knew she couldn't fight that smoke breathing beast, but humans in her experience were defeatable.

The groans continued. She had to do something. She looked around for anything that could be used as a weapon, but the cell was empty, there wasn't a single pebble lying around.

"Who is it?" she asked finally, trying to sound braver than she really felt. The noises and the pants stopped.

"Astrid?" The voice came from the corner, but she didn't recognize it at first. Then she heard someone crawling. He must have been in pain, because the moans became more frequent as he moved.

"I'm so glad it's you," said the voice again, but Astrid still couldn't see its owner, yet his voice...

"No!" Astrid shouted when she saw him coming out from the dark. "Don't you dare to come closer!" she shouted again, shivering with anger. "Don't you move a finger or I swear I'll kill you with my bare hands!"

He stopped where he was and sat down with another deep groan. It was definitely him, that disgusting Gunnerson. He was in bad shape, though. Astrid noticed a deep cut above his right eyebrow and his face was covered with dried blood. She didn't feel sorry for him, every fiber of her being wanted to kill him.

"I didn't mean to frighten you," he said quietly.

"You don't frighten me," she said in a voice cold as steel, "you disgust me."

He moved towards her.

"Gunns, I swear to all Gods, if you come any closer, I'll gut you out using nothing but my ten nails." She sounded serious and he had no doubts that she would do whatever she was threatening him with.

"Astrid, you have every right to behave like that," he said remorsefully, "I just... I think we should discuss a few things."

"I'm not discussing anything with you! You ugly piece of..."

He cut her off. "Don't you want to know where we are? Or how did we end up here?"

She didn't respond for awhile, she was just staring at him with narrow, hostile eyes. He made a point, but she didn't want his help or his lies.

"This place is too good for you," she snarled at him finally, lifting her fist, "but go ahead, illuminate me. And don't try anything funny or I'll bash your skull."

While threatening him, she noticed how different he looked from the last time he had seen him. He seemed broken, he seemed hurt and it wasn't just because of his severe injury. But she didn't want to think about it, she didn't want to sympathize with him.

"Just... hear me out, please. And if you still want to kill me after I've told you everything, I guess you are free to do that. I couldn't care less. It's not like this world has ever treated me right."

He looked pathetic. She gestured towards him to sit down, which he did with a painful grunt.

"Spill the beans," she lowered her fist but stayed at the bars.

"It's going to be a long story."

"I'm afraid, we have time. But first, where are we?" She tried to sound indifferent, but in truth, she really wanted to know it. She



had no clue, nothing was familiar, she was sure she had never been to this place before.

"We are enjoying the questionable hospitality of Alvin the Treacherous." His joke fell flat, Astrid wasn't ready for his geniality or good humor.

"So we are on Outcast Island, right?"

"Yes, we are."

She looked at him and bit her lower lip. Something had just occurred to her and it wasn't an easy question to ask. "How long have I been unconscious?"

"I don't really know. Couple of hours, maybe."

Her eyes narrowed again. "Did you... have you touched me?"

There was a puzzled look on his face at first. "I... why would I touch you?" She felt a bitter taste in her throat and her muscles got stiff. She was dangerously close to attacking him and he must have noticed her growing tension.

He shook his head. "Okay, I get it, but..."

"Have you or have you not?"

"No, of course I haven't!"

She was surprised how staggered he seemed about her accusations, knowing what he had done in the past - it shouldn't have come to him as a shock.

"Listen, Astrid... I've never touched you. Trust me."

She slowly slid down to a sitting position with her back still tightly pressed to the bars.

"Trust you?" she tittered, "That's a bold choice of word. I will never trust you."

"I understand your concerns about me," he said ruefully, "but I didn't really have a choice. I was forced to do something I didn't want." His voice broke and he sniffed as if he was trying to hold back his tears, but Astrid didn't feel pity at all.

"Do you know why we are here?"

"Well... I think I know more than you, but some parts of this story are pretty vague."

Astrid became infuriated again. "A "story"? Is that what it is to you, a "story"?!"

"I'm sorry, I just..."

She crawled to him and pushed his chest with full force. He fell on his back. "A story? Let me tell you my side of the story. You attacked me, took my tunic and my whole frickin' island thought I was

raped." His eyes grew wide, but she wasn't finished. "Yes, that's right. And instead of I don't know... giving some moral support, I was treated as a sinner. I was punished."

He propped himself on his elbows. "Punished? How?"

She was thinking for a moment, but she decided on not telling him about Hiccup. "It doesn't matter... It wasn't something cruel, but... it hurt me nonetheless."

He understood that it was a sensitive topic and even though he was highly curious, he didn't ask. She went on. "And then I went to my friend's wedding and in the middle of the night, something made me pass out and it kidnapped me. And now I'm sharing a cell with the person I hate the most, on the island of the person I hate second most. What a story, right?"

There was an awkward silence for awhile, but then he cleared his throat and sat up straight. "It was a Sniffer Puff," he said quietly.

Astrid gave him an angry, quizzical look. "What was a what?"

"A Sniffer Puff. The dragon, who took you."

"I have never heard of..."

He became a little braver and interrupted her. "I know. It's a very rare and special dragon."

"Are you telling me that Alvin has a dragon of which I have never heard of?"

He started to cough, really hard. He pressed one palm to his chest and he lifted his other hand and pointed towards the far corner of the cell. Astrid noticed that there was a bucket and a cup. She looked at him. Some viler parts of her that almost never took over, enjoyed seeing him suffer, but eventually, she got him the water. She was holding his neck steady with one hand and helped him drink with the other, but she didn't want to look at his face, so she was examining the wound above his eyebrow. It was really deep and should have been treated before it started to fester.

He quieted soon. She let go of him.

"Thank you," he said shyly. She shook her head in response.

"So... yes, it seems that Alvin has a dragon. I saw it when they came back with you and you know Alvin—he started to brag about it."

"How does it look like?"

"It has very peculiar scales, they seemed purple at first then they turned darker, almost black. And he was stocky, but taller than the Treacherous himself."

"Taller?" That was a strange way to describe a dragon's size.

"Yes, taller. He was standing on two feet and well, he was holding

you in his arms."

She wasn't as surprised as he thought she would be. She remembered being hugged tightly by the dragon, feeling his warm scales and the cold wind simultaneously.

"So what was Alvin bragging about?"

"Mostly about how easy it was to get you and the fact the 'dragon boy' would make once he realized you were gone."

Astrid closed her eye for a minute. She was sure that Hiccup had discovered by now that she was missing. She didn't want to imagine his devastated, confused face, but it popped into her mind. She tried to send him a message by thinking about him as hard as she could. She tried to tell him that she was alright.

"Astrid?"

She opened her eyes very slowly.

"Who is this 'dragon boy'?"

"It doesn't matter." No, she didn't want to share anything about him. She knew that Gunns and Hiccup had met on Berk, but there was no way she would say anything about Hiccup.

It seemed that Gunns politely accepted her answer, because he didn't ask about him again. "Anyways, I've also learnt that the dragon was called the Sniffer Puff and it produced gas that made his victim faint."

Astrid bit her lip. It was a hard memory; she wasn't used to being helpless, numb and overpowered.

"So the dragon kidnapped you for real?"

She nodded.

"I'm sorry, Astrid."

She gritted her teeth. "Just stop saying you are sorry. It's not like you didn't do exactly the same. Minus the kidnapping, but who knows, maybe you wanted to take me, but someone happened to ruin your plan."

He remained silent. A minute later, he changed his pose, shifting his weight from his legs to his straightened arms behind him. Judging by his contorted face, it did cause him plenty of pain.

"If you want, I can tell you what I did to you and why I did it."

She hesitated. She wasn't sure she wanted to know it. "If you try to feed me BS, you are going to regret it," she warned him in a stern voice.

"Have you ever heard of an island called Cod's Breath?"

"Of course I have. It's an uninhabited island, south of Berk." She

knew that place, she flew over that island several times in the past, but there was nothing interesting on it. Not anymore. Astrid had heard that once it was a thriving village, a fairly good place to live, but it suffered even more serious dragon attacks than Berk, so the people who had lived there either died or moved to the nearby islands. As far as she remembered, there were a few people on Berk, who had moved there from Cod's Breath, but her memories were vague.

"Well, I was born and raised on Cod's Breath," the young man admitted. Astrid's eyes grew wide.

"That's nonsense, there are no buildings on it. Or people. Or anything."

"Oh well... My mom is a stubborn woman. And she wanted to stay on her island, even after the last person had left it. She made home for us in a cave."

"What about your dad?"

He winced unpleasantly; it was obviously a sensitive subject. "I... I don't know my father. He had left before I was born."

Astrid almost said she was sorry to hear that, but then she pressed her lips together, so nothing kind or thoughtful could escape them. Gunns waited a little, but when she didn't comment, he went on.

"So... my mom is very important for me. She is the only person who ever cared for me. I might say that she is the only person I've ever really known."

Astrid rolled her eyes. She didn't care about his endearing childhood stories. "Get to the point," she said harshly.

"We are a little insensitive, aren't we?"

"Get to the point."

"Okay. So when Alvin kidnapped her, I..."

She fisted her hand and angrily hit the floor. "Oh, no! What is wrong with Alvin? Why does he always abduct parents?!" She couldn't believe it. First Heather's, now this guy's?!

"What do you mean \_always\_?" He leaned closer to her, but she didn't pull back.

"I have a friend and Alvin took her parents as well."

"Aaand... what happened to her parents?" He asked, concerned.

"It was years ago. They're fine, I've just met them."

"And why did he abduct her parents?"

Astrid took a deep sigh. "Alvin wanted her to steal something from Berk."

Gunns looked away into the darkness. "Well, his methods haven't changed in the past years, I'm afraid" he muttered with a heavy heart.

Astrid looked down at the cracks of the hard, grey floor between them.

"Is your mother alright?" she asked quietly and she didn't dare to look back at him.

He took a deep breath. "Well... I saw her when I arrived here. Her cell is a little better than this and... yeah, she is a tough woman."

"So Alvin blackmailed you?"

"Mhm."

She waited a little before asking the question she was the most curious about. "And what was the thing he told you to do?"

"He wanted me to get a piece of your clothing, so he could teach the Sniffer Puff your scent. The dragon has a very sensitive nose and can detect his target from miles away."

"So the dragon could sniff me out while Alvin's ship was on the open sea?"

"Exactly."

She didn't say a word, but let out a barely audible squeak of pain. Alvin's plan seemed to be so flawless and well-thought out, and it was something new, it felt unbelievably dangerous. Sadly, it meant that no one could suspect that she was here, so no one would come for her rescue. She was alone here, conquered and trapped. And the thing that bothered her most was that she had absolutely no clue why Alvin wanted her so desperately. Unless he wanted to take a heartless revenge on someone...

Gunns scooted closer to her, she didn't move.

"Astrid, I'm truly sorry. I wish I could..."

She looked into his eyes and cut him off. "Your wound looks terrible. It should be cleaned and sewed up. If you don't treat it properly, it's going to fester."

The noises of an opening door and coming footsteps put an end to their conversation. The guard, a burly Outcast soldier, hurriedly arrived to their cell door.

"Don't you dare to move a finger," he thundered while putting a key into the padlock, "I brought you food and water."

He opened the door and placed a bucket and some blackish bread on the bare floor. He straightened himself then stamped on the bread and snickered. "Bon appetite," he said and stepped out of the cell.

"Wait!" Astrid's sound was sharp and loud, it clearly surprised their

captor. "He has a deep cut on his forehead; it needs to be taken care of. I need more water. Clean linen, a needle and some thread."

She didn't understand why she had asked for those things, she shouldn't have cared about his well-being.

The guard looked flabbergasted.

"Oh, come on," said Astrid impatiently, "it's not like I'm going to sew us out from here."

The man shrugged. "I'll see what I can do," he said reluctantly and left with loud steps.

They didn't say anything for a long time, just sat there on the floor, evaluating.

"Thank you, Astrid," he muttered finally.

Astrid looked at him, she didn't seem angry anymore. "It's going to hurt," she assured him.

Â§Â§Â§

Astrid assumed that a couple of days had already gone by since she was taken prisoner; she had no proof though, since there was no difference between their days and nights in the dark dungeon.

Not much happened. They were fed every now and then with lukewarm soup and sour bread. They took Gunns away regularly and brought him back in worse shape every time. She cleaned his wounds and tried to ease his pain by applying poultice on the growing number of bruises.

The worst part was, of course, when she had to sew the deep cut above his eyebrow. To his luck, she was good with treating wounds, but it still must have hurt like Hel every time she put the needle and the thread through his flesh and skin.

His head was resting on her lap and he bit down on a stick to avoid biting his own tongue, but he didn't protest, he never said a word of complaint.

When she was finished, she took the stick from his mouth and started washing off the sweat and the blood from his face.

"You were brave," she said kindly, looking down at him.

He smiled weakly. "It's alrightâ€¦ at least I had something pretty to look at while I was numb with pain."

Her hands stopped on his face for a moment. She didn't comment, but she was clearly embarrassed. She silently continued her work.

He cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to offend you."

"S'okay," she said quickly.

"You know, I hope I'm not the first person who compliments you."

He saw her cheeks turn pink in the dim light.

## 11. The Secrets and the Pains

From the moment she started to speak, it was clear that the coloration of her cheeks had nothing to do with her being timid or touched; it was caused by nothing but pure anger.

"You know, I still despise you. I hate what you have done to me. I don't care whether you had valid reasons to justify your questionable deeds or not, I really don't. I took pity on you, that's all it was. You were in a bad state and I was taught to help the ones in need. But there's nothing else, I only want us to survive this hellish place, so we can part our ways - the sooner the better. I don't want your friendship and I don't need your sugar-coated words, they are nothing but a nuisance."

He shut his eyes and took a sharp breath. "I'm sorry, Astrid. I just wanted to show my gratitude, but it was clearly one of my many poor choices."

"It was," she agreed.

The awkward silence between them was broken by the sound of oncoming steps and the rattle of keys. An Outcast soldier appeared, the crooked smile that took over his pox-scarred face didn't promise any good.

"Splendid. I've just managed to put his face back into place, and now you'll ruin all my hard work," Astrid grumbled under her breath.

The man let out a hearty laugh while fiddling with the padlock. "Don't worry, missy, this time I came for you."

She stood up. She didn't show it, but a wave of terror jolted through her body when the man grabbed her wrist.

"I hope your cellmate is good with needles, too," the soldier said before he spat on the floor and let out another gleeful chortle.

Â§Â§Â§

After 5 days of exhausting and fruitless search, Hiccup decided on returning to Berk. He had already sent Fishlegs back to tell the news of Astrid's disappearance, but now it was his time to leave. He didn't give up on her, of course, but it became clearer by every passing day that he should continue the search elsewhere.

The parties couldn't find as much as a strand of hair or a footprint, so it soon became obvious that she was nowhere near the Bearcrusher's island. Late afternoon, he said farewell to Heather and her husband, who promised him to continue with the search and send a Terrible Terror to Berk in case they find something.

Hiccup kindly thanked them over and over again, before he mounted Toothless and flew away from Nerwind, taking a last look at the island with a bleeding heart.

He arrived back to Berk in the middle of the night after a tiresome, but uneventful journey. He was glad that the village was asleep, and he hoped that he could sneak into their house without waking his dad up.

He didn't succeed. His giant father was sitting at their table, absent mindedly sharpening a dagger with monotonous motions. It was clear from the dark circles under his eyes that it wasn't the first night he was holding a vigil, waiting for his son's return.

When Hiccup carefully opened the door, Stoick slammed down the dagger and the whetstone, jumped up from his chair and hurried to his son.

Hiccup tried to avoid it by taking a step back, the bulky man grabbed his shoulders and brought him into his tight embrace. Toothless took the opportunity, and swiftly went past the two men. He was much too tired to take part in the late night family reunion, so he climbed the squeaky, hardwood stairs and vanished somewhere upstairs.

"Thanks, Thor, I was so worried," Stoick sighed softly while he locked his offspring to his chest by iron-strong arms.

"I'm... I'm alright, dad," he mumbled back, slowly running out of breath in his father's tight grip.

Finally, Stoick let go of him and took a good look at his son, from head to toe. The chief sadly noted that he looked slimmer and woebegone; the past few days definitely had taken their tolls.

"Astrid?" He asked then worriedly and his heart beat hard when Hiccup's answer was nothing more than a moderate head shake.

"There's no sign of her," he added a sad moment later.

Stoick shut his eyes for a second and breathed heavily. "Son. I think you should rest a little, I hope ye can. And tomorrow morning, we need to talk. I have a few things to tell ye, and we need to discuss what we could do about Astrid."

Hiccup nodded. "I'll try to get some sleep."

He headed for the stairs, but then stopped and turned back. "Thank you, dad."

"It's okay, son. Now go, rest."

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The next morning, he woke up later than he intended to. He wanted to be up at dusk, but it was the strong beam of the morning sun that eventually lured him out from his dreamless sleep. Toothless wasn't in his room, but he could hear his chirps coming from outside.

He rubbed his eyes with the heel of his hands, then got up and walked down the stairs. He went to the bathroom and washed his face with



cold water. He heard his dad whistling a slow, sad tune in the kitchen and smelled the scent of fried eggs.

He had mixed feelings. He was more relaxed, but he had never felt his lost. He was hungry, yet his stomach churned at the smell of food, and he could taste nauseating bile in the back of his throat.

He greeted his dad and sat by the dining table, accepting a few bites of the freshly cooked food. At least, his dad didn't try to force him to eat, like he used to, when Hiccup was the scrawniest kid on the whole island. The big man quickly cleared the table when a little later his son excused himself for his lack of appetite.

Hiccup stayed at the empty table, waiting for his father, who returned a few minutes later with a mixed expression of concern and seriousness on his face.

"Son... we need to discuss a few things," he announced. Hiccup was watching him when he reached into the pocket of his fur vest and fished out a piece of paper. He put it down on the tabletop, in front of his son. It was the drawing Hiccup made of the Gunnerson boy. The young Viking grimaced when he recognized it.

"Dad, why are you showing me this?"

"Do ye know this man?"

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow. "Sure. He is the one, who attacked Astrid."

Stoick looked at his son with deep regret in his eyes. He took off his helmet, placed it on the table and sat down next to his puzzled son.

"Hiccup... I'm going to tell ye a few things now. I've made some choices, which were probably all wrong, but for a long time, I thought that I shouldn't burden ye with the weight of a sad past."

Hiccup gulped hard, the air around them got thicker with every passing moment.

"So... ye know that yer mother - may Odin bless her memory - was a lot younger than me..."

"Ye-es."

"Well, I mean there was 10 years between us and she was just a child when I have already come of age. Of course, I didn't have eyes for her at that time, she was just a young girl of 15, a member of our tribe. As a matter of fact, I didn't really care about girls or women in general. My priorities were learning how to fight, both dragon and man, and preparing to be a chief one day. Yer grandfather was nothing, but proud of me, but he was also concerned about the future of our bloodline, of our tribe, so he decided to take matters into his own hand. I'm sure ye know the island called Cod's Breath..."

Hiccup took a deep breath. He couldn't decide which one was harder: listening to his father, or answering his question.

"Yes, I know it. But there's not much on it, it's just a pile of old ruins..."

"Believe it or not, but many years ago, it was a thriving place, with plenty of food and ore and other goods. And my father thought it to be a good idea to arrange a marriage for me with the daughter of the island's chief. And, well... I didn't question my father's decision."

Hiccup bit his lips. It was really not a good time for storytelling. He should be out, searching for her, instead of listening to his father's disturbing tales of a past he wasn't part of. Stoick noticed his son's recklessness, but this time he didn't let him sneak away, like he always did, when they were having an uncomfortable conversation. The chief knew how important the information was he wanted to share.

"Son, I know you'd rather be somewhere else, but ye should listen to me now, and listen to me carefully. This story isn't about me, and it could be relevant if we want to find Astrid."

He looked down and apologized quietly. "So-sorry dad, I'm listening."

"It's alright, Hiccup. I know... I know ye're struggling, but ye should trust me... So... Yeah. Where was I? Oh. So, I never questioned my father's decision and I was just about to get engaged to this young woman; Hertha, the Fair\_ they called her. I think I was okay with her. I mean, I had no strong feelings for her, but everyone told me that by the end of the honeymoon, I was going to be madly in love with her, because that's how arranged marriages work... and well, after all, she was a pretty girl, they named her "the Fair" for a reason. She was easy on the eyes, indeed, she had big, dark eyes and thick dark hair, but I... I just didn't feel the connection, I didn't feel anything... And I believe, it was mutual."

Hiccup was flabbergasted. "Are you telling me that you were married to someone else before my mom?" He was surprised how hard it felt to find out that his parents weren't the ones and onlies in each other's life, but then his dad quickly shook his head.

"No, of course not. I've never had anyone else in my heart or in my house, but yer mom, but again, she was barely 15 when my father made his decision. Anyways, we were about to discuss the details of the engagement when the dragon attacks suddenly became much more frequent and fierce. We were preparing for battle every day and were fighting every night. These were desperate times; ye can't even imagine them, because the raids ye've witnessed in yer younger days were child's play compared to these. But the Hairy Hooligans are a tough crowd: we had strategy, we had weapons, we had able men and we fought back. Now, we both know that the dragons are intelligent creatures, and they quickly figured out that Cod's Breath was a much easier target than usâ€¦"

Stoick stopped for a minute to let the information sink in and to give himself a moment to gather the strength to continue.

"The weeks have turned into months and the months into years, and the good people of Cod's Breath either died or fled to Berk. Only a

handful of people stayed in their village, who refused to give up their island, and among them were their chief and his daughter, Hertha. My father sent me over to try to talk some sense into them and tell them that they would be welcomed on Berk."

Hiccup cut him off. "Were you still planning on marrying her?"

"Nah, we were busy, we spent those years trying to fight back the dragons and well... Meanwhile yer mother had turned into a beautiful woman and... I couldn't... we... ah, I'm sure ye know, \_how these things are\_..."

Hiccup found his father's embarrassment a tiny bit amusing, it was nice to see how his big, brawny dad was still stuttering and even blushing every time he was talking about his late wife... It was comforting to know how much his parents loved one another...

"Yes, I think I know \_how these things are\_," he confirmed gently.

"Okay, so... Unfortunately, there was a complete misunderstanding. They thought I wanted to move to Cod's Breath and fight for them, but I couldn't do it, because Berk needed me. Also, it would have been suicide, there was barely anything left on their island. When they understood that I wouldn't stay, they became hostile. Hertha and her father were cursing at me, blaming me and my father for letting Cod's Breath perish. And amidst all the shouting, a throng of dragons appeared in the air. We had no chance. Hertha was the only woman on the island, but she was a strong and fearless and she wanted to fight with her tribesmen. I couldn't let that happen. Even if there were no ties between us, I couldn't let her risk her own life. I took her to a cave and didn't let her out while the raid was on... She... She hated me for that, she hit me, she screamed, she tried to get free, she called me a coward, but I just couldn't let her get out and die, I just couldn't..."

He stopped again. The memories of the fateful night were painfully clear in his head. His eyes were watery and his lips trembled. For the first time in their lives, it was Hiccup, who placed a warm hand on his father's shoulder...

Stoick slowly continued. "And then the terrible night ended, but the morning was even worse. Suddenly, everything became awfully quiet, save from the sound of burning wood. An hour later I decided to leave our safe place, and we returned to the ruins of the village. Hertha was calling her father's name, but no answer came... And then... we discovered them... they were dead, all of them... torn by the dragons, scorched by the fire... I helped Hertha bury them with the respect they deserved. I placed the dead men, all fifteen of them, on a boat, which she set it on fire. We prayed together for their souls."

"I'm sorry, dad..."

"Ye know, son, the worst part is that I still don't know whether I did the right thing by saving her."

Hiccup quirked an eyebrow. "Of course you did! How is it even a question? She would have died."

"I'm afraid, it's not that simple. She blamed me for not letting her fight with her people, her father. She hated me for doing that. She despised me for forcing her to hide. And probably she was right. I'll never know."

"Dad, forgive me, I'm glad you have shared all of this, but I still don't understand why it matters..."

"Son, please! I'll get to it in a minute. We buried the dead with the deepest respect, and since there wasn't a soul or a building left on the island, I thought that we should go back to Berk together, but... Hertha refused to leave. It was madness, of course, but... I could make her stay in a cave for her own safety, but I couldn't force her to come with me."

"So you left her there?"

Stoick shrugged. "I did, I had no choice. I went back to Berk and life went on. Unfortunately, I had to bury my own father, but he died of old age, peacefully, knowing that I had someone - yer mother - to support me. It was a good man, a noble chief and a gentle father, but it was inevitable and I accepted that. And it also meant that I became the chief. I wasn't particularly happy about it, but there was some good in it, too, because I could make my own decisions and I finally had the chance to marry yer mother."

"And what happened to Hertha?"

"Oh, I didn't forget about her. I tried to visit her, I brought her food and other supplies, but she still hated me and the terrible events and her solitude had left their marks on her. After a couple of unsuccessful tries and a series of feisty quarrels, it became obvious that it was safer to send other people to Cod's Breath. Most of the time it was Mildew, who checked on her. He was also from Cod's Breath and I think they were even related on her mother's side or something."

"I didn't know that..."

"Well, he left Cod's after the first serious raid. Mildew is not much of a Viking, I can tell you that, but I don't blame him."

"Yeah, right," agreed Hiccup.

Stoick shrugged again. "Well, we are all different. Okay... So one day, not long after I had married yer mother, Hertha came to Berk. She was clearly seriously damaged by that time; ye could see the confusion in her eyes... And, huh, he was also heavily pregnant..."

Hiccup's jaw dropped. "But how is it even possible? I thought she was all alone on her island..."

"I don't know, Hiccup. But she... she came to me and told me that she wanted her son to be the rightful heir to Berk. She had letters from our fathers, informally discussing a possible marriage between us, and she claimed that if I had obeyed my father's orders, she would have been the mother to the heir. It was nonsense, of course, but she was nuts - I'm sorry, I have to say that. There was again a lot of shouting between us, and yer mother tried to calm her, but she pushed

her away, and cursed at her. Nothing worked with her, really.."

"But you had nothing to do with that child..."

"Of course not! I haven't seen her for years, plus she never said that I had fathered her child. Yet she wanted me to raise the kid to be the next chief. It was crazy, she was crazy... Finally, she decided on leaving Berk, even though it probably wasn't the best idea in her current state, but we couldn't talk her out of it, she refused to give birth on Berk. When she left, she threatened to take vengeance on me. She told me that the real father of his child is a powerful man, and they would defeat us together, and that their son would sit on the throne of Berk one day."

"Do you know who the father was?"

Stoick shook his head. "I don't have the faintest idea. As far as I know, it wasn't anyone from Berk, and trust me son, once we got rid of her, I really didn't care. But I still provided for her, I still sent my people over to Cod's Breath to check on her. And from time to time, she sailed over to Berk. Eh, after a while, we feared her visits more than the dragons'..."

"And what happened to the baby?"

"Oh, he was born and she was right about the gender, she had a son. He was a handsome lad, but unsurprisingly, it didn't do him good that he was raised by a half-witted, bitter mother... I had the chance to meet him, his mother brought him over a few times, but these weren't pleasant occasions. I haven't seen him in a while though, Hertha passed away a few years ago and her son forbid us to step on Cod's Breath again. I have to admit, that I couldn't care less after all those troubled years. But... the real problem is that he, too, thinks that he has the right to be the chief of Berk. I don't blame him for that, he was raised to think that, but I've always had a feeling that one day he would cause serious trouble..."

They were quiet again for a while, and finally Hiccup put two and two together. It was a hard thought, a shocking discovery...

"Father, you are not telling me that..."

"Yes, son. Hertha's son is the young man you have drawn the picture of."

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Astrid couldn't understand anything anymore. The pox-scarred man took him to Alvin. He was kind to her at first, telling her that if she cooperated, everything would be much better. He even used the word "pleasant", which was odd But she didn't say a word to him. And then he started to ask her weird questions, and she couldn't make heads or tails of them.

He asked her whether she could read runes, which was strange, because why couldn't she? Every kid could in the archipelago... And he kept asking her about some "special" runes that she had never heard of. He shook his fist in the air when she didn't answer any of his questions, and it was clear that he was on the verge of losing his temper...

She wasn't afraid of him, but his gibberish about runes and maps and dragons were disturbing... Finally, he gave it up. The brute went to her and pushed her into the arms of her guard, who took her back to her prison.

For once, she wouldn't mind having a company, but the guard dragged Gunns out of their cell and took him away.

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Alvin looked at the young man. He was in a bad shape, but he had known about his injuries - after all, he commanded his men to beat him. He was unusually quiet, too.

"Okay, so I guess our plan didn't work," he thundered finally, while he was walking up and down in front of Gunns.

He didn't look at the Outcast leader when he answered his question. "Not really. I tried to charm her, I tried to earn her sympathy, but... I guess, I had to admit that I failed."

Alvin suppressed a laugh, he had always found other's failure entertaining, but it was a bit different now, they had mutual goals, they both wanted to make the girl talk.

Gunns cleared his throat and looked at Alvin now. "Unless, of course, she really doesn't know about anything..."

Alvin shook his head. "Sorry to say that, lad, but I can't believe it. I know her, she is a cheeky little gnat, who thinks that she is tougher than she really is. But it is time to teach her a lesson she won't forget."

The young man raised a brow. "What do you have in mind, Alvin?"

The big man flashed a proud smile and greedily rubbed his palms together. "Torture, what else?"

Gunns didn't want to comment it, he had first handedly experienced that the Outcasts didn't treat their prisoners delicately.

Alvin looked at the two soldiers who stood the nearest to him. "You two! We are going outside to have some much needed fun with our tongue-tied lady friend. Go and get a barrel. Fill it with water to the brim."

The two hard-faced soldiers' laugh echoed in Gunns' ear for an uncomfortably long time.

## 12. The Mother and the Barrel

**\*\*Hello Dearest Readers. The new chapter is here, there are two more chapters left.\*\***

**\*\*Thanks for the reviews, I really appreciate them and believe it or not, they make me write faster.\*\***

**\*\*There is one thing though: if you ask about the new update (or**

anything else) as a guest reviewer, I can't answer your question, so head over to my tumblr page (haddocksortails tumblr com) and there I can answer the anonymous asks.\*\*

\*\*Anyways, I hope all of you have great weekends and I also hope that you will like this chapter.\*\*

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"Then we are immediately leaving for Cod's Breath!" exclaimed Hiccup. The unusual strength and determination in his voice surprised both him and his father; giving direct orders to his parent slash chief wasn't his forte, but there was no time to lose. The thought that Astrid could have been the prisoner of the ferocious madman for almost a week now made his skin itch and his heart skip a beat.

But to his disappointment Stoick shook his head. "I'm sorry, son. When I found the picture ye had drawn I sent a search party to Cod's Breath. They have found the filthy lair where the boy once lived, but it was clearly abandoned a long time ago."

Hiccup didn't say anything, he couldn't. Every time a glimmer of hope showed itself, it vanished the next moment. He was clueless, powerless, frustrated and despairing. For the first time in his life he had no Plan B and the inability to take action felt paralyzing.

But the choking silence of their home was suddenly broken by the thud of the opening door. Both men turned towards the source of the noise. At their doorstep stood Astrid's mom, Ashild Hofferson.

Hiccup immediately noticed that losing her only daughter took its toll on her appearance. Even though Mrs. Hofferson was past her fortieth summer, the last time Hiccup had seen her, she was a more mature, but almost equally beautiful version of Astrid - with a bit more curves and less radiant blonde hair. But now she was a mess. Her clothes and hair were unkempt, disheveled and her eyes were red and cloudy due to the thousands of tears she had shed in the past days.

She was only about half the height of her chief, but in two long strides she was in front of him and passionately grabbed his furry vest.

"Stoick, you need to save her! You need to save my daughter!" It was hard to decide whether she was begging or commanding, but the chief gently put his warm hands on her thin wrists, removing her ice cold fingers of his clothing.

"Ashild, you know I would do anything to find Astrid. She is very dear to my heart... not to mention his heart," he answered in a soothing voice and turned his head toward Hiccup who was quietly studying the scene that was unfolding in front of him. He blushed, but he agreed with Mrs. Hofferson, they had to find Astrid.

After the short pause, Ashild nervously shook her head. "No, no, no, you don't understand it. She is special, she is more important than any of us."

Stoick felt uneasy. After more than 20 years of dealing with his

difficult people, he still wasn't very good at comforting distressed women. "Ashild, yer daughter is a well-respected member of our tribe and I..."

She shook her head again and cut him off. "My chief... I know that all daughters are highly important to their mothers, but trust me, she is important to all of us. Her fate could be our fateâ€¦ She... I have confession to make."

The chief's hut once again became dead silent. After a long, awkward moment Stoick gestured toward the sturdy dining table and all three of them sat down quietly.

Ashild was fixing the tabletop for a little while, collecting her thoughts, calming her nerves a little. Then she took a deep, heartbreaking sigh of pain and she started to talk. "I'm sure you have heard the rumors about the Rune Reader; the keeper of our ancestors' knowledge and wisdom."

She paused. Both men, father and son, were looking at her with puzzled faces. The legend of the Rune Reader was just a rarely mentioned, vague story for most Berkians.

"I feel ashamed that I've kept such a secret from my chief, but it was safer this way. The Rune Reader does exist... For many generations, it was a female relative from my bloodline. As a matter of fact, it still is."

Now it was Stoick who shook his head in disbelief. It was clear that her daughter's disappearance didn't do good to Ashild. Eh, Rune Reader, as ifâ€¦ But the chief didn't want to sound rude, so he lowered his voice. "I'm sorry Ashild, I'm sure it's an interesting story, but I don't see how it is relevant nowâ€¦"

"If you just let me talk, I will get to it soon," she said with a haughty, lecturing tone and it stunned Hiccup. He couldn't understand a thing anymore and he was clearly shaken by the fact that all the people - whom he had known all his life - were keeping secrets from him and each other.

"The Rune Readers are highly important; they are the ones who know how to read the ancient, secret runes. These runes are hidden on the pages of the Book of Dragons, the original one, which is in your possession."

"Mrs. Hofferson, I can assure you that I've read that book a thousand times and there are no secret signs in it," protested Hiccup anxiously.

"I'm sorry to say that, but you are wrong, lad. They are there, but they look like old scratches and stains for the untrained eyes."

Hiccup closed his eyes for a moment to recall the look of the pages. They were old parchments, yellowed and torn by the fingers of time. They were definitely covered by all sorts of marks and scratches that he thought were the results of passing decades.

Mrs. Hofferson looked at him and continued. "The Rune Reader can decipher these signs easily and the hidden runes hide powerful



secrets. Hiccup, I know you're quite an expert on dragons, but there is more... There is a group of dragons called the "Hidden class".

Hiccup was again out of words. He thought that due to his persistence and constant curiosity, he was the one who knew the most about the dragons on the whole archipelago. And now as he was listening to the mother of the one he loved the most, a seemingly simple and mostly quiet member of his own tribe, he slowly recognized that probably his knowledge wasn't that great at all.

"Mrs. Hofferson, please..." he asked weakly, desperately wanting to know more and lucky for him, Ashild Hofferson was more than willing to continue.

"The Hidden class is the collection of the deadliest, most dangerous dragons. Like the Red Death. They are practically undefeatable."

"So why aren't they attacking us?" thundered Stoick a bit impatiently, but Ashild answered rather calmly.

"Because almost all of them are just dragon eggs yet, sleeping their terrible dreams inside their shells. Some of them were destroyed by our ancestors, but most of them were just buried. But certain things, like an earthquake, can bring them to surface and then the warmth of the sun hatches them. Probably that was the case with the Red Death too."

Ashild stopped for a moment and let the men process the new information. Then she went on. "The secret runes tell the location of these dragon eggs. And if this information falls into the wrong hands, if someone with bad intentions finds a Hidden Class dragon..."

She didn't finish her sentence, there was no need for that, because both Haddock's started to understand her worries, but they still didn't know how was all that relevant to Astrid's disappearance.

Stoick was the one who finally asked the question a few, long seconds later. "I'm sorry, Ashild, this secret must have been a heavy burden on yer heart for years, but I still don't quite understand what it has to do with Astrid."

"Stoick, I have mentioned before that all Rune Readers come from my bloodline. At any given time there's only one Rune Reader and since her secret is so valuable and dangerous, she lives far away from the civilized world, up in the frozen plains of the North, somewhere among the vast dunes of snow and ice. She shares her quiet and unusually long life with a group of hardy dragons that can endure the harsh conditions and help her guard the secrets. But there are a few things she needs to do during her lifetime. Her most important task is to train a new Reader when she is past her eightieth winter. The new trainee should be an adolescent girl from my family."

The chief and his son looked at each other. They both knew that there was only one female in Ashild's family who fit the description, but neither of them could decide whether it was good news or bad.

Stoick quirked an eyebrow "Are ye telling us that Astrid is with this

mysterious Rune Reader?"

Ashild shook her head with a heart breaking expression on her face. "No. I don't know where she is, but if she is with someone, who has heard about the Reader, she is in great danger."

"How? Why?" asked Hiccup impatiently, but Mrs. Hofferson knew he didn't mean to be rude. She had always liked the young chiefling, he had a good heart and a strong soul. In another life he could have been the perfect husband for her only daughter, in this one, sadly, it was probably not possibleâ€|

"Astrid doesn't know about anything. I should have told her about it, but... I haven't had the strength to share it with her yet, I wanted her to have as much carefree years as possible."

"But if she doesn't know about it, she is can't spill the beans about it," said Stoick confused.

"There's one more thing a Rune Reader has to do: for safety reasons, she has to move to a different location every twentieth winter. Before she does that, she shares her new location with the next possible trainee, so the aspiring Reader could find her when it is time for her to start her training. "

Stoick took a deep breath. Whatever Ashild was trying to tell them was very baffling. "So are you telling us that Astrid is in danger, because she knows the location of the Reader?"

"Well... She does. And she doesn't. I'm sorry, I know it's a bit complicated. Stoick, I'm sure you remember the Merciless Winter... Probably Hiccup has heard about it too."

The young man answered as if he was reciting homework. "The Merciless Winter was the cruelest and longest winter in Berk's known history. Many have frozen to death, others have starved to death... but I have no memory of it, I was just a baby back then."

Stoick was flabbergasted, somehow all this seemingly incoherent talk started to make some sense. "That was the winter you disappeared with your baby! I mean Astrid. And you have never given us an explanation..."

"Yes. That was the time when the Reader had to move. She sent a message to me with a Woolly Terror. They are like our Terrible Terrors, but they have much thicker skin and are covered with hair, because they live in the realm of the everlasting snow. I knew I had no choice. I had to sneak out in the middle of the night with Astrid in my arms and mount the Monstrous Nightmare she had sent for us. The Nightmares are very handy dragons in cold weather, but I'm sure you both know it. I knew that the purpose of our journey was to get the new location for Astrid, so she would be able to find the Reader when she came of age. I have a less important role in all this, I'm just the protector of the next Reader, because when I turned twenty, the current Reader was still young, barely sixty and there was no need to train me. Shortly after Astrid was born, the Reader was about to change locations, so I had to meet her for the new location, because I knew that one day she was going to teach Astrid."

"So, Ashild, are you telling me that Astrid has the map and it would be very dangerous if it ended up in the wrong hands?" asked Stoick.

Mrs. Hofferson nodded.

"Could it be a possibility that she was kidnapped because she has the map?"

"Yes, Stoick, I'm afraid that's what happened.

Hiccup was confused beyond belief. How could Astrid keep such a secret from him? For granted, she wasn't a blabbermouth, but he didn't remember hearing anything from her that had to do with the map or the secret runes...

But it was Stoick again who dared to ask the question. "So do you think that Astrid was kidnapped because she has the map and you fear that whoever has done this vile deed wants to take it from her by force?"

Mrs. Hofferson sat in silence for a while then she started to talk again, her voice barely above whisper. "The thing is that Astrid doesn't know about the map."

Stoick was losing his patience and slammed one of his enormous fists on the tabletop, the hard wood gave out a painful squeak. "Are you telling me, woman, that Astrid has a map with her and she doesn't know about it?!"

Ashild looked at Stoick first then her gaze slowly shifted to Hiccup. "Astrid doesn't have the map with her. It's on her."

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Astrid hadn't seen the daylight for almost a week, so when she was dragged outside by two brawny soldiers she started blink fast even though the sky was grey and unfriendly with clouds.

Not far from the entrance of the cave that hid the dungeons and the cell she was kept in, a group of vigorous Outcasts were gathered, obviously waiting for a dose of evil and twisted excitement. She didn't want to show fear, she did not want to feed their vile souls with her misery, yet she had no clue about what was about to happen - she only knew that she was in deep trouble for something she couldn't make heads or tails of.

The clearing at the mouth of cave was pretty much empty, save from the gathering Outcasts, and the only manmade object on the barren grounds was a huge barrel.

Astrid gulped hard when she saw it. When she was little, she heard all those freaky stories about the oath-breaking pirates, who were put into empty barrels. The head of the barrel was set in place and the bung was removed. The thick wood of the barrel more or less quieted the screams coming from inside, but Astrid was sure that the torturers enjoyed hearing the muffled noises of pain when they put the barrels on a boat, rowed it to where the water was deep, and pushed the wooden container with the pirate inside into the hungry

waves of the sea. She remembered how she shivered when she heard these tales, but it had never occurred to her that she might end up facing the mouth of a barrel one day...

She shook her head, trying to chase away the bad thoughts, but her two captors pulled her uncomfortably near the barrel before they stopped. From where she stood she could see that the barrel was filled to the rim with dirty water and it didn't add up with the pirate scenario. Before she could give it one more thought, she noticed Alvin who had just left the mouth of the cave. He seemed content, almost cheerful, while he was dragging the chained Gunns behind himself. The young man seemed vulnerable and broken. He could barely keep up with Alvin, he was struggling with every step. They were being followed by a dark shadow, that annoying old git, Mildew. The last time Astrid saw him they were on Berk and she wondered for a moment what he was doing on now Outcast Island.

Then she turned her head to look around. She was wondering whether they would bring out Gunns' mother from her cell, but there was no other female present apart from her.

Alvin stopped with Gunns a few steps away from Astrid and gestured to the two soldiers to let go of her arms while he unchained the fragile young man. Of course, Alvin didn't intend to give back their freedom, but it was pointless to keep them tied down, since they were surrounded by an army of Outcasts.

When Alvin was done, he walked to Astrid with a huge grin on his face, which gave her the gooseflesh and made all of her muscles tense. She was afraid of him, she would have been a fool if she wasn't.

"Well, well, well, look where we ended up because of your stupid stubbornness," he started with a stomach-churning fake sweetness in his voice, "but I'm in a very generous mood today, so I'm giving you one last chance to talk, young lady. Tell me everything you know about the Rune Reader. Tell me where she is."

Everybody was dead silent, all heads were turned to Astrid, all eyes were fixing her, waiting for her answer.

"I know nothing, as I have already told you," she said irritated. "But even if I did, I wouldn't tell you anything, not a single word." She debated spitting on the ground to emphasize her sheer disgust, but it would have been far too theatrical and it wasn't her style, so she just simply crossed her arms in front of her chest, like she always did when she found herself in an unpleasant or questionable situation.

When the stupid grin froze on Alvin's face, it felt like an accomplishment for Astrid, but sadly, it didn't last long and an evil fire lit up in the brute's dark eyes.

"You gave me no choice, you imbecile Hooligan, but trust me, I'll show you how to make a close-mouthed bird sing."

"Go ahead, you coward!" Shouted back Astrid at him and it seemed to surprise Alvin. She knew it would have been wiser not to talk, but she couldn't control the rage that was building in her.

"Yes, you are a coward, the only time you are strong and powerful is when you kidnap someone's mother and use her as leverage! You did that with Heather and now you did that to him too," she raised her hand and pointed to Gunns.

Alvin looked puzzled for a split second and it shocked Astrid, but what he said next shocked her even more.

"Hahaha! Nice! Did he tell you that I had kidnapped his mother?"

Astrid looked at Gunns, he hold her gaze for a moment, but then looked away when Alvin went to him and put an arm around his shoulder in a friendly manner.

"Look at this young man, Astrid and tell me, what you see. Perhaps now you think he is just a pile of broken bones and torn flesh. It's certainly true, my men know how to beat someone up, but there is so much more behind this mess."

A chilly feeling of uneasiness started to crawl up on Astrid's spine, she sensed that something was very wrong. She looked at the young man again. She treated his wounds and nurtured him back to life more than half a dozen times in the past few days.

"But when I look at him," continued Alvin, "I see determination. I see discipline. I see a bright future among the Outcasts. But do you know what? I'll let him do the talking, because I think it would be more painful for you if you hear it from his mouth."

When Gunns looked at her, an eerie shine glistened in his eyes. He straightened himself and started to look strangely healthier and less insecure.

"I don't have a mother," he announced simply as if it was the most natural thing on this Earth. Astrid's heart skipped a beat when she realized that she was tricked and betrayed. Again. She didn't like him, but she felt pity for him and she believed every word he had said in the solitude of their cell. She felt stupid. Defeated and helpless.

"I don't have a mother," he repeated, "I played a major part in your kidnap and I've asked Alvin's men to beat me up, so I would earn your sympathy. Which I did, so I think kudos for me."

"Don't flatter yourself, kid," interrupted Alvin suddenly while casually taking a few steps toward Astrid. Her instinct was to move, but she knew she had no chance to do anything. The Outcast leader was so close to her now that she could feel his warm breath on her neck.

"She never told you anything, we are not one step closer to the Reader," said Alvin to Gunns.

"Okay, this is ridiculous!" Astrid interrupted him and stamped with her foot angrily. "I've told you, I've never heard about anyone called the 'Reader'."

Her blood froze in her veins when Alvin's giant hand reached up from behind her and grabbed the back of her neck. The Outcast's fingers

dug into her flesh. It wasn't painful, but it was highly uncomfortable, especially when he forced her to face Mildew, who was standing a good five meters behind them.

"Are you sure, old man, that she is the next Rune Reader?"

Mildew waited for a moment before he gave a determined nod. "I'm positive. Her mother had told me."

"What?! My mother? Why would my mother...?"

Astrid couldn't finish her sentence, because still holding her neck, Alvin started to drag her to the barrel. He only stopped when her knees hit the wooden staves and she hissed in pain.

"I'm done with you, Astrid. I've had enough of your lies and your sassy mouth. But I'll teach you discipline now. Ooo, you think you are so tough, right? I'll show you tough!"

His grip tightened around the back of her neck and he made her bend over, pushing her head with full force into the filthy, slimy water.

Everything happened so fast. She swallowed a few gulps of the disgusting liquid, but luckily, she didn't inhale it. She tried to move her arms, but Alvin was standing right behind her and they were pressed to the barrel. The big man held her head underwater for two seconds, but they felt like minutes.

He lifted her head and let her take a quick breath then cruelly pushed her head back into barrel. This time it was much worse, she was frightened and inhaled the disgusting liquid. It stung her lungs, it was terrifying.

But what was even more terrifying that it seemed there was no way out from Alvin's handsâ€|

### 13. The Sons and the Daughter

**\*\*Hey guys. Thanks for your patience and the kind reviews. (Also, don't forget I can't answer guest reviews here, but feel free to ask me anonymously on tumblr, there I can answer.)\*\***

**\*\*Penultimate chapter.\*\***

Hiccup's head was buzzing with the ton of new information he had just heard. It was shocking to understand that nothing was as it should have been, but the most disturbing part was that they still had no clue about Astrid's whereabouts.

He didn't care what her mother had done in the past or what big and enigmatic shoes Astrid might have to fill in in the distant and theoretical future, he was only concerned about the painful present; now was what mattered most.

He remembered that people sometimes said missing a loved one was like missing a limb, but he had firsthand knowledge of how much worse the possibility of losing her was compared to suffer the loss of a foot, and he wished he hadn't known the difference.

His eyes sheepishly shifted to his father's face. Once Ashild had finished her unbelievable story, Stoick took a deep sigh and started to rake through his beard. It wasn't a good sign. Hiccup knew his father well, he only did this when he was distressed, worried or clueless, and it wasn't the sight his weary, young eyes hoped for.

There must be something more... a hint. A tiny piece of relevant information that all three of them had over-looked. There must be something. The cogwheels in his mind were spinning at full speed, but sadly, they did not spit out any important clues.

And then Ashild's quiet, heavy-hearted voice broke the tense silence again.

"There is one more thing... The night I returned with Astrid on the back of the Nightmare, someone saw us."

Stoick's hand stopped and Ashild's voice trembled while another wave of uneasiness and an almost two decade long regret rushed through her.

"You have to understand, Stoick, it was a difficult, desperate situation. Our whole island was at war with the dragons for generations, and then I arrived to Berk, riding a dragon, as if it was the most natural thing of the world. No matter who had seen us, it was to be considered a delicate matter, but luck wasn't on my side that night for the witness who had spotted us was a bit difficult to deal with."

Hiccup remained silent, even though every muscle in his body was tense, but Stoick couldn't keep it in himself. He hit the tabletop with a giant fist and raised his voice.

"Ashild Hofferson! Get to the point, for Thor's sake, it could cost yer daughter's life! Who was this person and why is it relevant?"

Hiccup noticed that Mrs. Hofferson was now shaking with fear and tears dwelled in the corner of her eyes before she slowly spilled out the rest. "It was Mildew. He saw us. He forced me to tell him about our journey. He knows that Astrid is the key to finding the Reader."

Hiccup and Stoick jumped up from the table simultaneously.

"We have to find Mildew!" Shouted Hiccup, but Ashild cut him off with bad news.

"I'm sorry, Hiccup, he is not on Berk. I tried to find him, but it seems that he left the island."

Hiccup took a deep breath, trying to calm himself, but he wished he could just scream away his thwarted rage.

"Well, he must be somewhere..." said Stoick.

"I don't know Stoick," answered Ashild, "I've been desperately trying to find him, but no one has seen him for days. Only Bucket and Mulch

said that they met him a few days ago and he mumbled something about visiting his neighbor, but that is ridiculous, since he is..."

"On Outcast Island!" shouted Hiccup. When Stoick cried out after his son to stop him, he has already left the house, calling for Toothless.

"Sorry, Ashild," said Stoick fast while he hurried after his son, "my son is about to do something crazy, and I need to save him. \_Them\_."

§§§

She had never felt worse in her life. Her lungs were about to explode and since she was dry heaving constantly, her throat burned as if she had swallowed a bucket of hot coal. The world was just a blurry, dark grey mass, spotted with relentlessly growing and shortening dark shadows around her. She heard their murmurs yet she couldn't make a word out of it, but she understood from their tone that they were mocking her, laughing at her misfortunes.

The largest, darkest shadow was close behind her. Alvin's huge hand was still holding her firmly by the back of her neck, forcing her head down into the sickening liquid every time she had finally managed to steal a few hard-earned breathes of air.

She was dizzy and sick, her body and soul weakened by the minute until she was more than ready to give everything up. She didn't have the strength to care about the current world around her anymore, or about that more pleasant one she had been abducted from what felt like a million years ago. Sadly, nothing mattered anymore, all was bleak, all was desolateâ€|

And then came this weird feeling, which was strange at first, but became charming and comforting a little later. The lightness of death seemed like a possible option, a solution, which sweetly started to coax her tormented soul. Suddenly, it was really tempting. It seemed easier, smoother, warmerâ€|

Yeah, something wet and warm fell on her skin. Probably it was raining; she heard some dull noises in the background, which might have been thunders, but it didn't matter, she was barely conscious. She was hanging loosely in his captor's tight grip, coughing from time to time, always shivering.

There was some turmoil around her, she couldn't see a thing since her lids were closed and unbearably heavy. On the plus side, she could finally breathe; for some reasons, unknown to her, Alvin stopped bathing her in that awful, slimy sludge. But everything still hurt very much; her mere existence was torture itself.

And then she was lifted up in the air, she couldn't feel solid ground under her feet anymore. It wasn't painful, and even if it was, she couldn't care less. Nothing seemed important, nothing at all.

When she blacked out, it was salvation.

§§§

He knew his dad was shouting something after him, but it didn't stop



him, not for a second. Toothless was waiting for him outside, curiously watching his master storm out from his home, running towards him. Something was wrong, he knew it. He couldn't always understand his human's words, but he could read his gestures, he understood his facial expressions and it was quite obvious that in the past few weeks he was never feeling well or happy.

He never made that stupid grin of his, the corners of his mouth never ran upwards and he became paler by every passing day.

Toothless knew it was because of the blonde girl who was riding the Nadder. The Nadder was here, on Berk, Hiccup visited her almost every day, but the girl was gone. Toothless missed her too. He sniffed into the air every once in awhile, hoping to catch her smell, but his efforts didn't have any positive outcome, she had vanished without trace.

But now, when he noticed his rider running at him at full speed, wearing a determined face, he knew that it was about the girl. He ducked his head swiftly and leaned closer to the ground to make it easier for Hiccup to get on his back. With a sharp click, his prosthetic was in place, and Toothless was more than ready to hit the air.

Hiccup patted the side of his head. "Come on, bud, we are going to Outcast Island."

They were up in the sky in no time.

§§§

The flight seemed unusually long, and even though Toothless did the best he could do, the gathering storm was showering them with unwanted obstacles. The sky became grey and unfriendly, but finally, Hiccup spotted the silhouette of the dark island through the veil of the thickening clouds. It grew bigger by every flap of Toothless' wings and Hiccup saw a group of little shadows between the shore and one of the high hills of the island. He gritted his teeth and leaned closer to his dragon's back, hoping that they could shave another second or two from their time. It was a race against the unknown, but he still felt it in his guts that it was worth all of their hard efforts.

And then something got his eyes. A little, blonde spot among all that darkness. It was her. It had to be her.

§§§

Stoick wasn't angry when his son didn't react to his calling, but stormed out of their home instead, he was just simply worried. He barked a hasty good bye to Ashild and ran for his dragon's pen shouting all sorts of commands to the people around him. He quickly led the Rumblehorn out and mounted him with an uncanny easiness. He was sure that they had no chance to catch up with Hiccup and Toothless, they were far faster than the robust Skullcrusher and his equally giant rider, but he had to be there for his son and Astrid. The darkening sky and the swarm of clouds wasn't the best sign, but he didn't hesitate, he left the island of Berk without looking back.

Â§Â§Â§

Finally, he could land, a few meters away from Alvin. He didn't care about the soldiers around him, with a growling Night Fury by his side, they meant no threat. He didn't care about Alvin either, but he did have something in his arms for whom Hiccup would have exchanged everything he had ever owned or loved in a heartbeat.

She seemed so tiny and fragile, she didn't look like her usual warrior-self, now she was just a small bird in the evil trap of the Outcast leader's massive arms. It was a heart-breaking sight.

"Oh, sorry, son, I forgot to send you an invite to our lovely gathering, but I'm glad you could join us."

Alvin's strong, clear voice was intimidating, but it didn't scare Hiccup. He didn't move, he didn't say a word, his eyes were on Astrid, trying to catch a glimpse of her face, but it was covered by her wet hair. The brawny man waited for some time, but he quickly got bored when he got no reaction from Hiccup.

"You are no fun, you know? What's more, you are ruining our fun, and I hate it."

Every muscle in his body was tense again. He was ready to jump at Alvin's throat at any given opportunity, still not caring a least bit about the soldiers around him, but Astrid's safety was first, and currently he was attached to the Outcast beast.

"So, I assume you came for this," he thundered again and raised Astrid from the ground by the back of her neck. She seemed lifeless, she didn't move, her head was hanging down. Hiccup was frightened to death and he was sure, it showed on his face, because Alvin started to laugh at him. "You know what? You can have her. She is completely useless and-"

Alvin's gloating was interrupted with a determined voice coming from behind him. "Put the lass down. This ends now."

The Outcast leader turned his head and noticed Stoick the Vast coming out from the thick bushes with his Rumblehorn. Seeing the Hooligan chief put an early end to Alvin's amusement. He could mock and tease Hiccup since he had just the right leverage in his very own hands, but two Haddock's with two dragons weren't exactly the gang he wanted to mess with, even with his most able men around him.

He didn't answer a word to Stoick, and for a brief moment he was still hesitating, evaluating, before placing Astrid's limp body on the muddy ground. The staring contest between the two leaders was still on, but from the corner of their eyes they both saw Hiccup rushing to the girl. He knelt down next to her, gently collected her tormented body, fearing the worst, hoping for the best.

Stoick's gaze shifted to his son, who was frantically searching for the faintest sign of life in her, pressing his ears to her chest then looking at her pale face, stroking away the mud and the rain that tainted her skin and seeped into her hair. Stoick didn't dare to take a breath and a silent wave of tension swept through the island, muting everyone around them.

And then... she coughed. She started to cough up the water that was choking her while gasping for air. It was a disastrous combination, and it must have been very hurtful, too, but she was alive and that was all that mattered.

Hiccup took her into his lap and made her sit up, but since she was still only barely conscious, he held her tight by her waist, while his free palm drew tender circles on her back. She was coughing for a good while then she became quiet and weak again seeking shelter in his arms. She couldn't talk, her mind was still in and out of this world, but she knew she was safe now, she knew that it was him, around her, warm and protecting, smoothing around her like a much needed blanket. He held her, rocking her body slowly, mumbling slow words of encouragement that only reached her ears.

Once Stoick realized that for the time being, everything turned out to be okay, he let cleared his throat. Even though Astrid was saved for the time being, he still had unfinished business with Alvin. He took a few large steps towards him, stopping only when there was just a couple of inches between them.

"What the Hel were ye doing to her?" He hissed into Alvin's face.

"No-nothing. Turned out, she wasn't the person I was looking for."

Stoick sensed his fear. He knew they were free to leave anytime, but he wasn't going to until he made him understand that this time he had crossed all existing lines and boundaries.

"Listen to me, ye disgusting maggot, if ye dare to lay hand on any of my people one more time, I swear to Thor, I will burn yer island to the ground with ye still on it."

Alvin narrowed his eyes. "I was fooled by this ancient idiot," he said and pointed at Mildew who was shaking like a leaf not far behind them. "He talked me into this Rune Reader yakshit, which is clearly nothing, but a fairy tale."

Stoick didn't comment on the Rune Reader, he still didn't know what to think about it, but if Alvin thought it to be a lie, it was probably better this way. "Yeah. Ye can keep Mildew, I'm afraid, he is not welcomed on Berk anymore."

"But I have aâ€|" Mildew started to complain weakly, but he was cut off by Stoick's strong voice.

"Save it, old man, yer words are nothing but the curses of a twisted mind; ye couldn't be a better fit for this island. And as for us, I think it's time to leave." He waved at Hiccup, who was still rocking Astrid's mostly motionless body in the rain, signing him to stand up, but suddenly an unfamiliar, young voice interrupted him.

"You certainly don't have any respect for the people whose opinion differs from yours, do you?"

Stoick turned his head to the right from where the voice came. A young, handsome man rose to his feet. He looked strong and resolute, even though it seemed that he was no better shape than Astrid. In

Hiccup's hands Astrid shivered when she heard his voice

Stoick took a good look at him. Years had passed since he had last seen him, yet he recognized the young man immediately. He had his mother's eyes - not just the shape and the color, but the glow of madness as well.

"I have nothing to do with ye, young man. I only came here to take what belongs to my tribe. And if ye'll excuse me my son and

Gunns interrupted him. "Your son? How noble that sounds. What about your \_other\_ son?"

Hiccup hated his cheeky tone, no one had ever dared to talk to his father like that, but he started to be really concerned about Astrid. She was still trembling in his hands no matter how desperately he tried to warm her with rubbing her arms and bringing her closer to his chest. She was still in shock, gasping for air and mumbling mostly incomprehensible words. Hiccup wanted to leave as soon as it was possible for Astrid's sake, but he also wanted this nonsense to end once and for all.

"Other son? That sounds interesting if you ask me," Alvin said, rubbing his two giant palms together, looking at Stoick with a huge smirk on his face. He couldn't help it, but enjoyed the discomfort reeking from the Hooligan chief.

"I have one son and one son only, and I'm taking him home now."

Gunns stepped closer to him, it was clear that neither the size of Stoick nor the authority he represented intimidated the young man.

"From what I've heard, I'm the rightful heir to Berk. So you might as well take me too. I mean look at this sappy little pile here" he said gesturing to Hiccup, "do you really think he would make a good, powerful chief anytime at all? He is nothing without his dragon"

He was cut off by a harsh grunt coming from Toothless. The dragon couldn't quite understand the humans, but it was clear that this one didn't have any decent bones in his body; his evil intentions were almost palpable.

"Ye might as well finish it now," said Stoick with a warning tone.

"Why so serious, Stoick? I've just started to enjoy myself again, there's nothing like a good old family reunion," said Alvin still sounding way too cheerful. He was casually walking towards Gunns and even if the Outcast leader was a safe distance from Hiccup and Astrid, his sudden good mood was unsettling for Stoick.

"This has nothing to do with my family, this boy is delusional."

"Am I?" Oh, that cheeky tone again, Hiccup wasn't a violent person, but he really wanted to punch him in the face, for everything Gunns had done to them or planned on doing now. "I hate him" whispered

Astrid weakly to his chest, which made his blood boil. But it wasn't his battle, it was something his father had to fight.

"Yes, Gunns, whatever yer mother had told ye, it wasn't true. I have nothing to do with ye." Stoick tried to sound chilled, almost comforting. Sadly, he knew how to deal with craziness â€" yet he also knew that there was no proven method against it; craziness could do anything, so he kept his guards up.

But whatever had happened next, he surely wasn't expecting it. No one was.

While they were talking, Alvin sneaked behind Gunns' back and while the young man was busy lecturing Stoick the Vast, the Outcast leader slowly took out a dagger from his belt. He swiftly grabbed the young man from behind and a moment later, he was holding him tight with one massive arm at his waist while he put his dagger at Gunns' throat.

Hiccup drew Astrid closer to his chest, Stoick only raised a brow; it was crazy at its best.

"Okay, so I feel left out and it really bores me," stated Alvin. Gunns didn't dare to move, he was probably crazy, but he was no fool, he felt the sharp coldness of the blade right below his Adam's apple.

"What do ye want, Alvin?" Stoick sounded calm, but Hiccup knew he wasn't far from losing it. His dad really hated when the wrong people started messing with him.

"I dunnoâ€¦ probably some more respect? A dragon or two? I have a list."

"Okay, Alvin, that's not going to happen, ye know that."

"Then, I'm afraid we have to say goodbye to this fine young man."

Stoick didn't know what to answer. He disliked the boy, but he hated violence, unnecessary deaths around him and Alvin knew it. He knew he would have leverage no matter who his hostage was. Oh, the Hooligans were such softiesâ€¦

There was an awkward silence, the only sound came from the quieting rain. A few moments later Stoick almost gave in, but then suddenly Mildew stepped out from behind them and started to talk.

"You can't kill him."

Alvin turned his head towards him, planning to command one of his men to quiet the old fool, preferably, forever, but Mildew kept on talking.

"You can't kill your own sonâ€¦"

Hiccup's jaw dropped. He saw his father shook his head. The blade trembled in Alvin's hand. And Mildew just talked. He talked about his visits to Hertha on Cod's Breath, how he confided in him, her only living relative.

Among all the secrets she shared, there was one really big and questionable one. It was about a young Outcast soldier, who happened to visit her every once in awhile. Hertha liked him, he was brawny, fierce and unpredictable. And a little later it was pretty much obvious for Mildew that her mysterious visitor liked Hertha, the Fair back.

No child out of wedlock was welcomed in the raw world of Vikings, so Mildew suggested blaming her pregnancy on Stoick, but she was hesitant to do it, she hated Stoick, she hated every single soul on Berk. But later Mildew persuaded her that it was the best she could do for her son's future and so did it. She was pointing at Stoick, but she had no luck, because no one on Berk had believed her. She left the island like a defeated army.

Mildew knew that her lover was Alvin, the Outcast, she had mentioned him quite a few times. He also knew that his visits had stopped before she discovered her pregnancy. He felt sorry for her, but he didn't want to intervene, there was nothing he could do, he was just a simple cabbage farmer.

While he was talking, Alvin slowly let go of Gunns. It was clear for everyone that he wasn't in denial, but he slowly recalled his long forgotten past. His cheerful mood was gone, he was confused. And so was the young man standing in front of him.

There was nothing Stoick could do or say, it was a family reunion after all, but they weren't part of that family. Not really paying attention to the people around him, he slowly walked to Hiccup, followed by the sluggish Skullcrusher.

"Son, it's time to go." Hiccup nodded. He gently put down Astrid and then stood up to lift her up in his arms. Toothless was next to them in a blink of an eye. He put Astrid on the dragon, then sit behind her. They flew away quietly.

Â§Â§Â§

Up in the air everything seemed lighter for Stoick. Probably for the first time in living history he was the one leading their group of two " with the weak Astrid in his arms, Hiccup didn't really feel like breaking the speed record.

The rain was slowly dying away and the beams of the Sun started to break through the clouds, it was a beautiful, orange sunset.

Stoick turned his head to look back at his son and probably catch his cocky smile he hadn't seen in awhile, but what he saw, made him blush.

Behind him, on the back of Toothless, Astrid was sitting sideways, with her arms around Hiccups neck. And" they were kissing. Gently, almost politely, but certainly like two people very much in love. Toothless noticed the weird look on Stoick's face and turned his head.

It surprised him so much he stopped flying for a moment. It shook the couple on his back and broke their kiss. They giggled.

"Toothless, careful, we have precious luggage," Hiccup said lightly.

Astrid shook her head. She was feeling better, he was still an idiot. But she loved this idiot, and she hope that she this time she was free to love him.

Hiccup smiled at her. He knew that the hardships were probably not over yet, but he had her with him and that was all that mattered.

So he ducked his head to claim her lips once again.

End  
file.